



A backstory on the political, financial, and community dynamics surrounding the proposed conversion of Menlo Park's downtown parking plazas to affordable housing sites

Money, Power, & Clout

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Notes and credits

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Public IRS filings and news reports provided the sources for financial figures and organizational structures. Campaign finance filings, organizational websites, public records, and news reports by *The Almanac* and the *Palo Alto Daily Post* provided facts and information about the public officials, public figures, advocacy networks, and relationships referenced in this commentary.

Grove Foundation annual giving totals reflect disbursements shown in available public records. For years with PDF-only filings, the data may be incomplete. Political contribution totals for Eva Grove reflect full FEC cycle totals unless otherwise noted.

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“The will of the people is the best law.”

Ulysses S. Grant

Executive summary

This commentary examines the intersection of money, power, and clout in Menlo Park. It focuses on a course the City Council is on that, if unchecked, will convert city-owned parking plazas used by many (including the author of this commentary) into affordable housing sites, despite considerable community objection.

Public records, tax filings, city documents, campaign-finance data, organizational websites, and local news reporting document the civic footprint and political influence of Karen Grove, The Grove Foundation, the Grove Action Fund, her Menlo Together advocacy group, and their interrelated groups and individuals. Those sources also inform the issues surrounding the upcoming Nov. 3, 2026 Menlo Park ballot measure that could put the brakes on downtown housing by mandating that voters approve any change in use of a downtown parking plaza.

Without question, Menlo Park faces high state housing quotas. And pro-housing advocates like Intel heiress Grove, a Menlo Park resident herself, lobby for those with housing needs.

But Menlo Park's arguments that the parking plazas it owns downtown will provide the only suitable location to build the affordable housing needed to meet state quotas are unfounded. Instead, any decision to convert the plazas to housing sites represents a policy choice by those in power, and one that correlates to a local scion's well-funded advocacy network and pro-housing priority.

INTRODUCTION

The irresistible force and the immovable object

The paradox of the irresistible force and the immovable object offers a framework for considering the dispute over the future of Menlo Park's downtown. It presents a conflict pitting housing advocates against townspeople.

On one side of the upcoming collision, a potentially irresistible political force is pushing to build low-income housing on heavily used city-owned parking lots. That force soon will square off against opponents who assert that those plazas are immovable objects the city must preserve for community-wide use.

As in the paradox, if one side overcomes the other, either the force was resistible, or the object movable.

* * *

On Nov. 3, 2026, Menlo Park voters will provide a glimpse as to what must give when they approve or defeat the Save Downtown Menlo organization's public parking plaza use ballot initiative. The question that the grassroots collective qualified for the general election ballot is whether any city decision to change the primary use of a downtown parking plaza, such as turning it over to a private developer to build apartment buildings, should receive prior voter approval.

As the election approaches, local philanthropist Karen Grove remains an influential participant and polarizing force. For years, she has pushed for more affordable housing in Menlo Park. More recently, her efforts as housing commission chair and council majority confidante steered the city toward isolating the parking lots downtown as its chosen site to build low-rent units.

As Grove's lawful organizing, advocacy, and financial apparatus take center stage on affordable housing, she now is directing her money and clout toward defeating the ballot initiative that she described at a Nov. 4, 2025 City Council meeting as a "vague and costly" measure. She is behind an organization that calls itself Menlo Park Neighbors and Small Business Owners for Affordable Homes and its *homesformenlopark.com* website, having filed its initial city registration and having given it \$40,010 in early 2026.

Meanwhile, ballot measure proponents have mobilized to demonstrate how eight downtown plazas are essential to Menlo Park's business district, and their loss would harm and, perhaps, destroy the Santa Cruz Avenue business district and the bucolic setting of the town itself. This opposition acknowledges the council majority's RHNA-compliance rationale, stating it supports adding housing in Menlo Park, but at other locations.

Until voters get the final say in November, they likely will encounter rhetoric-heavy campaigns spreading facts, spin, and even disinformation. Plus, the city won't provide much help because it does not expect to have informative financial impact and parking studies completed until shortly before the election.

As it stands, then, no one can say who will win.

Ironically, the city could accommodate the competing interests if it would relocate the affordable housing it seeks to build to other "opportunity" sites it already has identified. Despite that, lame-duck Mayor Betsy Nash and her council majority continue to push construction downtown, and on an expedited schedule.

So, while voters will decide in November who gets the final word, their response also should resolve a broader question: Are Karen Grove and those she funds an irresistible force or are the business district's 556 parking spaces an immovable object?

CHAPTER 1

The Grove family money and how some of it gets spent

Andy Grove fled to Austria from his native Hungary during the 1956 revolution and arrived in America in 1957. After earning a Ph.D. in chemical engineering at Berkeley, he helped build Intel Corporation into the world's dominant microprocessor manufacturer. Grove served as Intel's president beginning in 1979 and as CEO from 1987 to 1998. During that time, the company transformed itself into a major driver of the personal computer revolution.

\$100M+ Grove Foundation Net Assets	\$19.6+M FY2024 Foundation Disbursements	\$1.1M Charitable Giving 2017-2024
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Andy Grove and his wife, Eva, established The Grove Foundation with part of their Intel fortune in 1986. The foundation's net assets exceed \$100 million. It distributed more than \$19.6 million in FY2024. Andy died in March 2016; Eva, in 2023. The couple had two daughters, Karen Grove and Robie Livingstone. Grove, a Menlo Park resident, serves as The Grove Foundation's board chair and sole director.

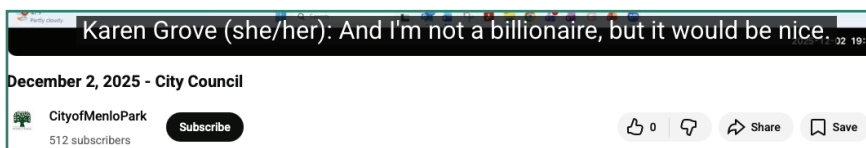
The Grove Foundation gets high marks for its efforts. In its Winter 2024 *Journal*, PEAK Grantmaking observed that the foundation “believes equity is central to long-lasting change and an inclusive approach to improving lives.”

However, because the Groves included a 25-year spend-down clause in their foundation documents that requires distribution of all assets within 25 years of their deaths, under the foundation's charter it will end operating by 2048.

Foundation website statements additionally clarify that it will stop funding of immigration, reproductive health, and safety net programs even sooner, by October 2026. The website further notes that *all* distributions will end within four years thereafter: “By 2030, the Grove Foundation will make its final grants and cease to exist. We aim to communicate clearly and consistently with all of our grantees to ensure that everyone can make the most of their funding as Grove spends down and that everyone can plan for their financial future.”

As the face of the organization, Karen Grove maintains a high profile as a civic participant in the Menlo Park region. The Grove Foundation website states that when she is “not working . . . [she] organizes her community for deeply affordable housing in downtown Menlo Park – near public transit, shops, and parks.”

As YouTube video confirms, after a speaker at the Dec. 2, 2025 Menlo Park City Council meeting described Grove as the council’s billionaire “silent partner” on downtown housing, Grove announced to the room: “*and I’m not a billionaire, but it would be nice.*”



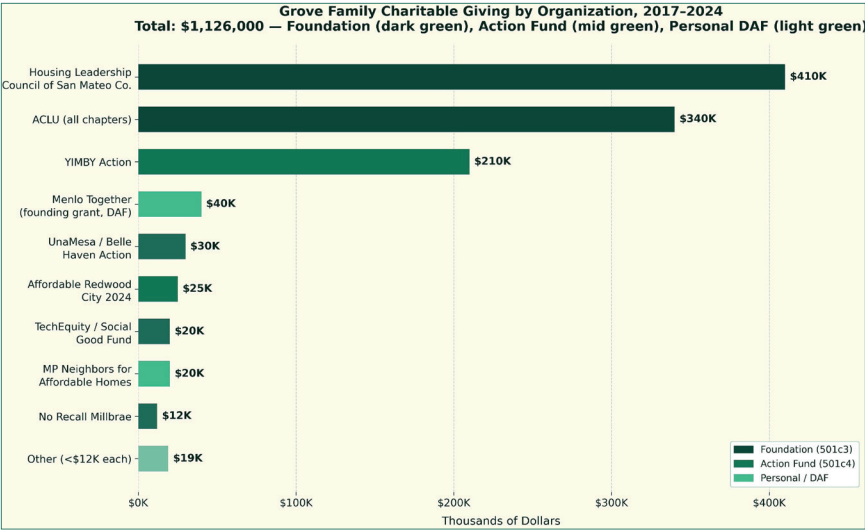
In making that response, Grove drew an effective contrast between her personal wealth and the charitable organizations her family funded. It positioned her as a community member rather than a plutocrat, a neighbor rather than a person with the resources to sway political decisions and influence elections.

Even so, the difference between being a billionaire and having control over \$100 million in philanthropic assets, some of which

can influence political strategy, may matter little, especially considering that electoral campaigns in cities of just under 34,000 residents like Menlo Park often operate on a shoestring budget.

Furthermore, the fact remains that oversight of over \$100 million in philanthropic assets can translate into substantial civic and political influence.

In Grove’s case, she is not averse to distributing those assets, particularly to support initiatives aimed at addressing the region’s documented shortage of affordable housing.



Source: IRS Form 990/990-PF via ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer.
Totals for 2018–2019 may be incomplete because of PDF-only filing formats.

Beginning in 2017, the Grove Foundation and the Grove Action Fund, its companion 501(c)(4) advocacy arm, directed \$1,126,000 to organizations that seek to eliminate obstacles to affordable housing construction on the San Francisco Peninsula, and in Menlo Park specifically.

A Portfolio of Influence

While many local families are known for the clout gained through name recognition and contributions, perhaps none is as prominent on affordable housing in Menlo Park than the Groves.

And in Karen Grove’s case, she lives in the city where she exerts her influence, regularly addresses the City Council on housing issues, frequently hosts rallies for her centerpiece organization, Menlo Together, and funds affordable local housing organizations such as the Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County (HLC).

The Almanac also has reported that Karen Grove provided a \$40,000 founding grant to Menlo Together through a donor-advised fund. Menlo Together’s own materials identify Karen Grove as part of its leadership structure.

The Grove alliance take-aways

Karen Grove’s side of the clout grid includes:

Karen Grove <i>Chair & Sole Director: Grove Foundation · President: Grove Action Fund · Co-Founder: Menlo Together</i>	• Intel heiress – daughter of Andy Grove (1936-2016) (third CEO of Intel Corp.) and Eva Kastan Grove (1935-2023) • Describes self on LinkedIn as “donor, organizer, connector, advocate” • Founder of Menlo Together (-2017-2018) with Adina Levin • Former Chair-Menlo Park Housing Commission at time the commission developed the current Housing Element • Small local campaign donations to Combs, Wise, and Schmidt • No on V: major donor, along with Grove Action Fund (\$70,000+) • Leading campaign against SDMs ballot measure, including initial funding of \$40,100 to MPN
The Grove Foundation <i>Private Foundation · Tax-exempt status recognized in 1986 · Net assets \$100M+</i>	• Current Board Chair & Sole Director: Karen Grove • As noted in Winter 2024 <i>Journal</i> of PEAK Grantmaking, “staff at Grove invest time in developing long-term partnerships with nonprofit partners, as they are an invitation-only funder.” • FY2024 distributions more than \$19.6 million / Targets 2030 wind-down • Key grantees: Housing Leadership Foundation of SMC · UnaMesa \$30K · Menlo Together \$40K (seed grant)
Grove Action Fund <i>501(c)(4) Political Advocacy Group · Est. May 2018 ·</i>	• President: Karen Grove Assets: \$15.3M (FY2024) · down from \$36M (FY2021) • FY2022: reported reduction in assets (Schedule O); shares staff with Grove Foundation • No on V: \$70,000+ in direct contributions • IRS-listed revenue: FY2023: \$442,783; FY2022: \$473,832; FY2021: \$383,011

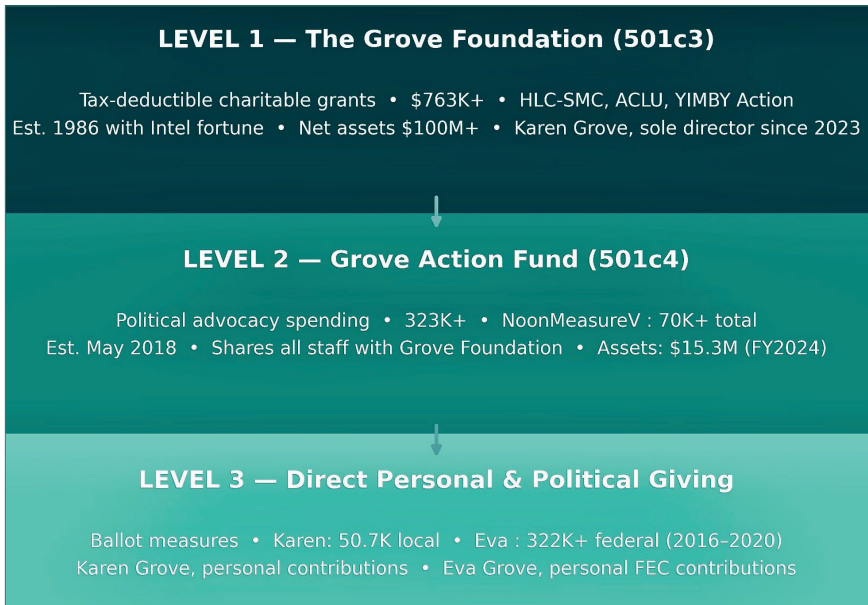
Menlo Together <i>Pro-Housing Civic Org · Founded 2018</i>	• Co-founded by Karen Grove + Adina Levin; serves as centerpiece of Karen Grove's community organizing in Menlo Park • Web site indicates, "Menlo Together is a fiscally sponsored project of Foundation for Regional Transit" a/k/a Friends of Caltrain (FRT) • Grove Foundation seed grant provided \$40,000 • Made No on V contribution of \$9,600 • Nash: founding member (emeritus) · Taylor receives support through Belle Haven Action • Several steering committee members have gained appointments to Menlo Park city commission seats including Grove and Levin • Active 2025-26 campaign for downtown parking plaza housing and organizing opposition to November ballot measure requiring voter approval on converting downtown parking to other uses
Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County (HLC) and affiliated Housing Leadership Action (HLA)	• HLC is 501(c)(3) organization and prior Grove Foundation grantee / HLA is a 501(c)(4) issue advocacy organization • Major player on No on V (2022) • It and Menlo Together co-hosted 2025-26 events on downtown housing • Co-organizer of Menlo Park Neighbors and Small Business Owners for Affordable Homes, the November ballot measure opponents
Foundation for Regional Transit (FRT) <i>aka Friends of Caltrain</i>	• Provides infrastructure for Menlo Together • Menlo Together operates as a fiscally sponsored project under the FRT umbrella and receives administrative and support services from FRT • Adina Levin, Menlo Together co-founder, on FRT board
Belle Haven Action/ UnaMesa Association <i>Belle Haven Advocacy</i>	• Council member Cecilia Taylor formed Belle Haven Action • Belle Haven Action is a major project of UnaMesa Association • The Grove Foundation contributed \$30,000 to UnaMesa in 2017 • Chan Zuckerberg Initiative gave BHA \$75,000 in 2018 • Belle Haven district is excluded as alternate site for affordable housing projects based on informal pledge Taylor brokered with the City Council • Recently became subcontractor for outreach services under an \$89,960 contract, with the City of Menlo Park indirectly funding the engagement
Menlo Park Neighbors and Small Business Owners for Affordable Homes(MPN)	• Companion group formed in July 2022 to oppose Menlo Balance • Almanac refers to Karen Grove and Adina Levin as its leaders • Organized by/through Housing Leadership Council SMC, running in part through Menlo Together • Measure V funders included Karen Grove (\$50,000), Grove Action Fund (\$20,000), Housing Leadership Council - SMC (\$43,000) • Soundly defeated Measure V • Betsy Nash advocated with the group to help defeat Measure V • Newly resurfaced as the opponent to Save Downtown Menlo's ballot measure with Grove listed as an organizer and \$40,010 donor • Newest website, <i>homesformenlopark.com</i>, lists Housing Leadership Action of San Mateo County as sponsor and top funder, which preliminary filings show was at a \$50,000 level • Calls newest campaign the "STOP the Menlo Park Anti-Housing Initiative" and lists its primary contacts as the HLC executive director and "Karen Grove, Co-founder Menlo Together" • Newest "STOP the Menlo Park Anti-Housing Initiative says endorsements received from "Betsy Nash, City of Menlo Park Mayor," and Grove-linked groups such as the ACLU, HLC/HLA, and Menlo Together. It also lists an endorsement from <i>thewolves.net</i>, which is an organization that describes itself as believing "our democracy has been hijacked by the billionaire class and we aim to fight back through peaceful, non-violent protest and grassroots activism."

CHAPTER 2

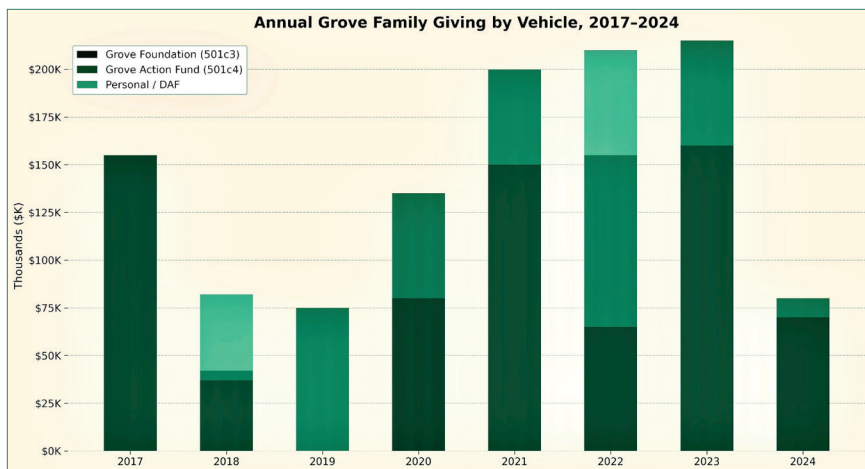
The three-level Grove financing track at work

A common architecture used in contemporary philanthropy relies on a three-tier structure of giving made through a private foundation, a 501(c)(4) organization, and personal political donations. What distinguishes the deployment of this structure by the Grove family is how Karen Grove recently has geographically concentrated these three levels of giving toward the unitary issue of affordable housing in the single city of Menlo Park.

Their tiered approach, which has built institutional capacity at the same time as making election contributions, looks like this:



Sources: IRS Form 990/990-PF (Grove Foundation EIN 77-0108124); Form 990 Schedule I (Grove Action Fund EIN 82-4373804); San Mateo County Cal-Access; FEC filings.



Approximate annual totals from IRS filings. Grove Foundation figures reflect grant disbursement years; Action Fund figures reflect fiscal year-end. Some years may be incomplete where PDF-only filings apply.

First level: The Grove Foundation (501(c)(3))

Established in 1986, The Grove Foundation is the family’s central institution for giving. As a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, its grants must support charitable endeavors. But “charitable” is defined broadly, and the foundation’s grant history shows a razor-sharp match between philanthropy and purpose.

For example, the HLC received \$410,000 from the Grove Foundation over six years, with funding increasing as Menlo Park housing debates intensified. HLC’s website lists its mission as working “with communities and their leaders to create and preserve quality affordable homes.”

The Grove Foundation’s contributions to HLC, YIMBY Action, Seamless Bay Area, and other housing and transportation advocates demonstrate its support of social planning measures they believe can open doors so teachers, public service employees, and others can afford to live where they work.¹

¹ It is doubtful if Presidio Bay Ventures response to the Menlo Park’s Request for Proposals (RFP) for affordable housing on downtown parking plazas by could meet Grove’s hopes on this front. It proposes building 140 units that would rent to persons earning *above* the income bands the RFP prioritizes. Its remaining 207 units would lease at market rates.

A \$30,000 grant to UnaMesa Association – the parent organization of Belle Haven Action, whose founder and executive director is City Council member Cecilia Taylor – shows again that the foundation indirectly can fund organizations led by or aligned with local politicians. Belle Haven Action is a Menlo Together member organization. Its founder and director is Cecilia Taylor, a Menlo Park City Council member whose voting record on downtown housing aligns with positions advocated by Karen Grove and the funding organizations she leads.

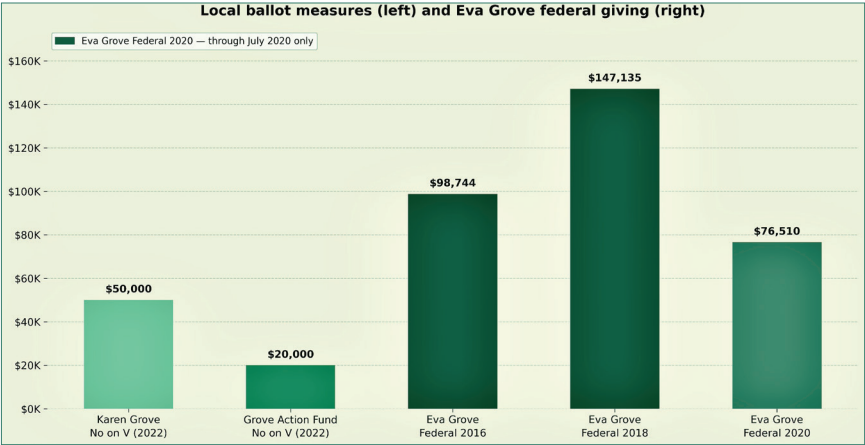
Second level: The Grove Action Fund (501(c)(4))

Karen Grove established the Grove Action Fund in May 2018 as a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization. Public filings indicate it supported issue advocacy and political activity, including local ballot-measure spending as campaign-finance records document.

The 2020 action fund donation of \$20,000 to Menlo Park Neighbors for Affordable Homes – the No on Measure V committee – is one of its notable contributions. Combined with Karen Grove’s personal \$50,000 donation to that committee, the Grove family directed \$70,000 against Measure V, which would have restricted high-density up-zoning in Menlo Park. With their help, the measure failed.

By FY2024, the Grove Action Fund, which shares personnel with the Grove Foundation, reported total assets of about \$15.3 million. This is a move downward from a prior high of roughly \$36 million in FY2021.

Third level: Personal contributions



FEC via CampaignMoney.com; San Mateo County Cal-Access; The Almanac; Palo Alto Daily Post. *Eva Grove 2020 data through July only. Eva Grove totals include all FEC transactions.

Karen Grove and her late mother have a sustained record of making political contributions personally. Even so, while Karen Grove’s documented local contributions are modest by the standards of her wealth, they signaled her support of Jennifer Wise and Jeff Schmidt in 2024, and even to Drew Combs in 2018.

Eva Grove’s federal giving tells a different story. For example, FEC data aggregated at *campaignmoney.com* indicates that in the 2015-2016 cycle she contributed \$98,744 to federal candidates and PACs, mostly associated with Democratic party candidates. Then, in the 2017-2018 cycle, her federal contributions reached \$147,135. In the following cycle, through July 2020, they totaled another \$76,510.

CHAPTER 3

Building an affordable housing voting bloc within the City Council

Funding structures such as that used by the Grove family show how targeted contributions can effectively influence community dynamics and shape policy decisions. In Menlo Park, this has worked by coalescing a majority of the City Council members into a working group that aligns with Karen Grove’s housing agenda.

A look at the individual Menlo Park City Council members helps illustrate how that alignment followed years of interlocking relationships, endorsements, and interaction with Menlo Together and the Grove organizations.



Karen Grove and Betsy Nash at Menlo Together’s May 27, 2026 “Kickoff to Block the Save Downtown Menlo Anti-Housing Initiative” event.
Photo Credit: ProBonoPhoto.org/Ed Ebert.

Betsy Nash

Betsy Nash’s alignment with Karen Grove and her agenda for downtown Menlo Park is pronounced and sustained. A founding member of Menlo Together – the Grove-seeded organization launched in 2018 – Nash was first elected to the District 4 seat that same year and re-elected in 2022. Nash accelerated issuance of the request for proposals to build downtown housing while resisting consideration of alternate sites. She continues to urge use of a state loophole that would allow the city to give the parking plaza land to low-income

housing builders by declaring it qualifies as “surplus” property. Nash’s term ends in Dec. 2026, and she is not seeking reelection.

Cecilia Taylor

Cecilia Taylor represents District 1, including the Belle Haven neighborhood where she grew up. Taylor is the founder and paid executive director of Belle Haven Action (BHA), a community organizing group and a member organization in Menlo Together. According to BHA's website, Taylor formed the organization in 2017 "to advocate for the residents of the Belle Haven Neighborhood in the City of Menlo Park."

The Grove Foundation's \$30,000 grant to UnaMesa Association – BHA's parent entity – helped fund the creation of the group, as did a \$75,000 contribution from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

Taylor was part of the original three-member voting alliance that drove many consequential council decisions during 2020-2024, including the controversial Feb. 2021 vote to hire Burke, Williams & Sorensen (BWS) and its partner Nira Doherty to replace the city's longtime attorneys. She also secured a pause on placing affordable housing projects in her ward, saying other city areas needed to shoulder the duty to satisfy Housing Element quotas.

In June 2026, the *Palo Alto Daily Post* reported that the California Fair Political Practices Comm. cleared Menlo Park to sign a contract with Climate Resilient Communities – which subcontracts with Belle Haven Action – for outreach on the SAFER Bay flood-protection and climate-resilience project. It was the second time the city sought FPPC guidance involving Taylor, after a prior inquiry about her vote on the Willow Village project.

Taylor's term ends in Dec. 2026. She announced on June 29 that she will not seek another term.

Jennifer Wolosin

Jennifer Wolosin served as District 3 representative from Nov. 2020 through Dec. 2024. A Menlo Together member, she was the

original third member of the Nash-Taylor governing bloc, that among other things, voted over two dissents to hire BWS to replace the law firm that had advised the city for 61 years. Wolosin did not run in 2024, citing family and personal reasons.

Jeff Schmidt and Jennifer Wise

Jeff Schmidt replaced Wolosin in District 3 in Nov. 2024 after running unopposed. His campaign nonetheless received modest contributions from Karen Grove and building trade unions. His campaign website identified community as a priority, and he stated, “Our housing needs to be balanced, responsible, and affordable.” His Mar. 2026 California Form 700 showed he held Meta stock worth between \$10,001 and \$100,000.

Jennifer Wise, elected in Nov. 2024 to represent District 5, similarly received support from Karen Grove and other Menlo Together-linked donors. An endorsement from Jennifer Schindler, who at the time was chair of the Menlo Park Planning Commission, noted, “She’ll help ensure we deliver on our vision for a vibrant, diverse Menlo Park and on the strategies in our state-approved Housing Element.”

In their first 18 months on the council, Schmidt and Wise regularly aligned with Nash and Taylor, including voting to issue a downtown housing request for developer qualifications, to designate six developers as pre-qualified, to issue a formal request for proposals, and to engage the three bidders in council open house and planning sessions.

Drew Combs

Drew Combs (District 2), first elected in 2018 and re-elected in 2022, has been the council’s most independent member, including his vote against the BWS law firm hire and his opposition to the continuation of the downtown housing RFP process until after the Nov. 2026 election. His December 2025

District 2 newsletter stated that the city had “alternative paths to pursuing redevelopment of the parking lots . . . I don’t think the city council should take any additional actions to move the project forward until the voters have spoken.”

Combs is seeking re-election in 2026. A city Finance and Audit Commission member, Vamsi Velagapudi, is running against him. Velagapudi’s campaign website asserts that revitalizing downtown “means creating a virtuous cycle of new homes and patrons, sufficient parking, and full and varied storefronts.” The Grove-led group opposing the upcoming ballot measure says Velagapudi has endorsed their “vote no” campaign.

On his 2026 Form 700, Combs disclosed that he and his spouse each earned more than \$100,000 per year from jobs at Meta. He listed holding Meta stock valued between \$100,000-\$1 million.

The City Council take-aways

The Menlo Park City Council side of the power grid shows:

Member	Dist.	Grove / Network Connection	BWS Hiring
Cecilia Taylor	D1	First elected 2018. Re-elected 2022. Mayor 2024. Founder & Exec. Dir., Belle Haven Action, affiliate of Grove-funded UnaMesa. YIMBA Action endorsement. Term ends 12/2026. Not seeking re-election.	YES
Drew Combs	D2	First elected 2018. Re-elected 2022. Mayor 2025. Voted no on replacing city lawyers and against parking plaza RFP motion. Meta employee. Term ends 12/2026. Seeking re-election in 2026.	NO
Jennifer Wolosin	D3	First elected Nov. 2020. Mayor 2023. Menlo Together member. Helped create Nash-Taylor majority bloc. Term ended in 2024. Did not seek re-election.	YES
Jeff Schmidt	D3	First elected Nov. 2024 (unopposed). Often joins with Nash, Taylor, and Wise on housing issues. YIMBA Action endorsement. Term ends 12/2028.	—
Betsy Nash	D4	First elected 2018. Re-elected 2022. Mayor 2026. Founding Menlo Together member. YIMBA Action endorsement. Term ends 12/2028. Not seeking another term.	YES
Jennifer Wise	D5	First elected Nov. 2024. Support from Grove, IAFF Local 2400, and MT-affiliated donors. YIMBA Action endorsement. Term ends 12/2028.	—

CHAPTER 4

A David, a Goliath, a structural urgency, and a field of landmines

On Nov. 3, 2026, Menlo Park voters will decide a question whose implications extend beyond three parking plazas to the north of Santa Cruz Avenue. The Save Downtown Menlo ballot initiative would require voter approval before a city-owned parking lot downtown could be converted to housing. In practical terms, ballot passage would place an electoral check on a fast-moving process that created substantial public opposition. But make no mistake, passage does not block construction of affordable housing on the lots – with voter approval – or anywhere else in Menlo Park, such as on the scores of “opportunity sites” the city already identified.

David and Goliath

A David-and-Goliath framing appears often in local debate if the sides are not evenly matched in money, experience, or institutional support.

In Menlo Park, Karen Grove occupies the position of the most prominent and best-resourced participant in this debate. Plus, she wins. Her network has not lost a major local contest since 2018, maintaining a winning streak of candidate races and ballot contests, including for Nash in 2018, Wolosin in 2020, No on V and Nash in 2022, and Schmidt and Wise in 2024. As between being a David or Goliath, Grove is the latter.

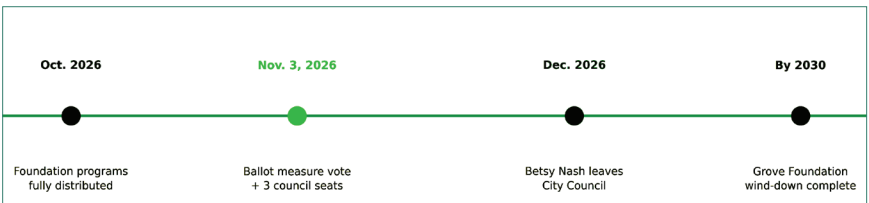
Supporters of Save Downtown Menlo emerge as a David: a new grassroots coalition of merchants and residents who argue that retention of the parking plazas serves a public need while alternate sites could accommodate needed additional housing.

The group garnered thousands of signatures to get their initiative on the November ballot. Yet, SDM lacks the experience and track record of its Menlo Together opposition in raising money and winning elections.

Plus, as noted earlier, Karen Grove, her two funding vehicles, and her Menlo Together advocacy group have created a formidable enterprise that endorses candidates aligned with their pro-housing policies and funds opposition to ballot measures that could slow down or limit construction of new residential units. Their undefeated string of election victories demonstrates an effective use of money and clout to influence those in power.

As a result, the disparities in experience and resources between the Grove alliance and SDM well could shape how the ballot measure campaign unfolds and, perhaps, even its outcome.

The urgency of now



Source: Grove Foundation 990 filings; City of Menlo Park records; The Almanac.

Another little-discussed structural issue inherent in the Grove alliances may explain the sense of urgency Menlo Together and others have taken toward moving developer selection by Menlo Park for downtown housing forward rather than awaiting to see what voters decide in the Nov. 2026 election.

For the first time since 2018, the following levers of influence are simultaneously active – and could shift or expire after the Nov. 2026 election.

When	Event	Significance
Oct. 2026	<i>Certain Grove Foundation funding ends</i>	Immigration, Reproductive Health, and Safety Net programs must allocate all remaining funds; staff exits by early 2027.
Nov. 3, 2026	<i>Ballot initiative + three council seats (D1, D2, D4)</i>	If Save Downtown Menlo's ballot measure passes, voter approval required before any parking lot is converted; city plan calendar pushed significantly.
Dec. 2026	<i>Nash and Taylor leave City Council</i>	Founding Menlo Together member Nash and Taylor, another reliable Grove-aligned vote, depart.
2023-2031	<i>Housing Element compliance window</i>	Must add 2,946 RHNA units by 2031, with downtown parking plazas listed as priority building sites.
By 2030	<i>Grove Foundation wind-down complete</i>	Foundation ceases to exist; the civic infrastructure it built – HLC, Menlo Together, allied organizations – must self-sustain or collapse.

The RHNA landmine and lingering questions about alternate sites

The City Council majority asserts that Menlo Park has limited flexibility in making timely progress on its Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) of 2,946 units for the 2023-2031 housing cycle. They point out how noncompliance can expose the city to the “builder’s remedy” under state law that blunts local control over housing developments.

At the same time, state law *does not* require Menlo Park to build on any given site such as the downtown parking lots. Further, the city’s Housing Element identifies multiple alternate development locations. Further, in principle, the city could amend its Housing Element to prioritize other locations, even though its planning staff has dismissed most all other sites as suboptimal.

The city issued its RFQ on Jan. 29, 2025, and continues framing the downtown project as the key way to advance Housing Element program H4.G. Critics argue the process is moving ahead without first resolving key policy issues.

The cost-to-the-city landmines

City materials describe how development on Parking Plazas 1, 2, and 3 needs to include 345 affordable housing units and replacement parking. In return, the city has said it would provide developers \$1 per year ground leases for 4.83 acres of prime commercial real estate that already is heavily used.

To date, Menlo Park assumed its land donation would sufficiently entice developers to build in Menlo Park without requiring the city to provide additional funding. However, developer proposals submitted in December 2025 made clear that assumption would not hold. Presidio Bay's proposal for a six-story parking garage put its cost at \$33.3 million but noted it would need financial help from the city to build it. Related California and Alta Housing's proposal included a nine-story parking structure with 574 public spaces that would need a public subsidy to get built. The amounts of support are not addressed directly in the developer RFP responses, but at a council study session, ranges of \$10 to \$27 million in parking garage subsidies were floated.

Plus, the city's broader fiscal picture compounds that concern considering how Menlo Park's annual operating budgets have been drawing on reserves to bridge the gap between revenues and expenses. As they have projected upcoming annual budget deficits, the city's staff already has signaled that Menlo Park may want to consider possible 2028 ballot tax measures, including a half-cent sales tax. The city's current financial projections hardly look capable of accommodating parking garage subsidies of \$10 million, \$20 million, or even more, plus the annual debt service that expenditure could bring.

Apart from whether Menlo Park can afford the downtown affordable housing projects, news reports continue to scrutinize low-income housing construction, including their per-unit costs

and reliance on tax credit financing. Because project designs and subsidy costs for the downtown sites have not been finalized, accurate cost estimates remain guesswork pending receipt of a council-authorized consultant's report.

The school and safety landmines

In 2022, the Menlo Park City School District issued a “School and Housing: A One Pager” supporting additional housing while listing the adverse effects it could cause. District public information officer Parke Treadway confirmed in a June 2025 email that the “document was created by our previous superintendent to engage the community in the housing element discussion that was happening at the time.” She noted that the district deleted the one-pager when it refreshed its website after hiring a new superintendent and that district enrollment now was more manageable and a Nov. 2024 bond approval helped to “address safety and security investments at our facilities.”

Nevertheless, the district's 2022 observations raise legitimate issues about the placement of any high-density developments geared for families with children *anywhere* in Menlo Park:

- For every student that enters, MPCSD must find \$22,000+ to educate that child.
- For every 400 students, the cost to build a new campus, excluding land, is \$40,000,000+.
- Development fees paid for by developers cover less than 20% of the actual cost of expanding facilities.

Compounding these concerns, the RFPs under consideration by Menlo Park could include developer fee waivers and selection of a non-profit entity as the developer, making the new housing projects exempt from taxation. The RFP responses also do not include land for school buildings or funds to construct them.

Beyond the landmine of schools, as yet Menlo Park has not conducted parking, traffic, or safety impact studies to see how the projects under consideration would affect quality-of-life concerns. The Menlo Park Fire Protection District is noticeably absent from the City Council meetings and discussions, and on more than one occasion its leadership has said the developers have not contacted them for guidance.

Others have noted that even if the ballot measure fails, significant obstacles could remain, such as the revival of the SDM litigation over the use of a surplus land declaration and scrutiny of high-rise building designs from the fire protection district.

Meta landmines

Many attribute the significant elevation of Menlo Park's housing quota in the current Housing Element to the Meta corporate campus build-out in council member Cecilia Taylor's ward that added so many jobs. Indeed, the city's housing mandate in the current Housing Element increased 349%.

Meta and the city tried to address some of that fallout during a five-year negotiation calling for Meta's Peninsula Innovation Partners to build out Willow Village with 1,730 new residential units and 1.6 million square feet of office space. The deal as struck called for the building of nearly 18 percent of the below-market rate housing units Menlo Park needs to add in this Housing Element cycle and 100 percent of its market-rate housing quota. Meta also pledged to include \$188 million in community amenities in the \$3.5 billion project.

On May 1, 2026, Meta halted the Willow Village project, citing "shifting real estate market conditions and evolution in space requirements." The latter "evolution" likely anticipated headlines like this from *The New York Times* on May 19, 2026: "Meta Lays Off 8,000 Employees, as A.I. Casualties Mount."

Meta's recent announcements leave Menlo Park with inflated housing quotas and employment layoffs. Further, the city lacks any recourse against Peninsula Innovation Partners because its development agreement openly stated "Nothing in this agreement obligates (the) developer to undertake the project."

So, the city generally and Cecilia Taylor in particular have a Meta problem. Taylor's district received the benefit of the new Meta jobs and corporate campus but now is no longer contributing toward Housing Element requirements through the 1,730 units Meta said it would build. Further, Taylor has shielded her district from taking on other affordable housing projects based on her deal with the council to keep construction west of Belle Haven.

Without the Willow Village project, Taylor's district will not contribute as expected toward meeting Housing Element requirements. Also lingering is the fact that Taylor's paid executive director's job is with an agency that in 2018 received a \$75,000 grant from the Meta-related Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

Shrapnel from the Meta landmine has not just hit Taylor.

Drew Combs stands silent on Meta issues, as he should considering that he works for the company and recuses himself from matters involving it. So, as a council member, Combs cannot say or do a thing on the issues raised by the Meta job numbers and its decision to abandon the Willow Village project.

Mayor Nash, meanwhile, used the Meta news to double down on accelerating downtown construction. Rather than consider amending the Housing Element or finding other large-capacity development sites away from downtown, Nash made this understatement: "1,730 is a huge number to make up." She added "it's disappointing and makes it even more important that Menlo Park pursues affordable housing downtown."

Sites without landmines

As mentioned, everyone could win if only the City Council would consider alternate sites that the Save Downtown Menlo coalition says will “provide greater capacity than the downtown plazas – in locations better suited for residential growth.” They include:

- The Corporation Yard, a 2.35-acre city-owned site near Burgess Park. Its build-out could occur in tandem with the adjacent SRI/Parkline parcel.
- 1283 Willow Road, a slightly larger site than parking plaza no. 2 that the city owns, could stand in with no loss of the number of units projected for the downtown site.
- The Bohannon office park, which could serve as a location for a mixed-income neighborhood with hundreds of homes.

While city staff disputes the viability of the SDM’s list of alternate sites, many contest whether the City Council has adequately or seriously looked at alternatives to the downtown parking plazas. And to date, the majority of the council, backed by Grove and friends, would rather fight than switch.

CONCLUSION

Will anyone win?

At first blush, the imminent decisions about how Menlo Park should use its downtown parking places look as if they will pit the electors against the elected, the masses versus the monied.

Karen Grove and her organizations contend that their opponents minimize the need to satisfy state affordable housing mandates. They assert that the duly elected City Council is better equipped than voters to make housing decisions that would improve the city's affordability to lower-income residents.

And Grove's friends are rallying behind her, as Menlo Together member Heather Hopkins did in a Nov. 3, 2022 guest opinion published by the *Almanac* that noted, "Just because they happen to share some values does not mean they are conspiring some take over of Menlo Park (and certainly not for their own financial or other gain). There is nothing nefarious about a group of engaged citizens choosing to spend their time and money in ways that align with their values."

The Save Downtown Menlo coalition sees the issue differently. It argues the populous should retain the final say on their downtown's future, and the election results will show whether voters support converting parking plazas to housing. And it is hard to ignore the concerns that then-mayor Combs flagged in 2025 about the "extreme concentration of affordable housing in one location" and how it poses a risk of "strangling downtown."

No matter the outcome on Nov. 3, 2026, the decisions that follow will indicate if money talks and clout matters, or whether the power to rule truly rests with the people of Menlo Park.

About the author

Michael Giudicessi lives and writes from his home in Iowa. He received a journalism degree from the University of Missouri and a law degree from the University of Iowa.

“Money, Power, and Clout” is the third in a series of commentaries about the fight over the future of the downtown Menlo Park parking plazas. It is available online only.

The first commentary, *“Mayor Burgess & MP’s Big Yellow Taxi,”* recounted the story of one man’s vision for Menlo Park and how the city acquired and built the downtown parking plazas to fulfill it. It also looked at how replacing those parking plazas with apartment complexes could doom the downtown commercial district.

“First, Do No Harm” then catalogued the many losses the community could incur by converting the downtown parking plazas to other uses. It also reviewed how Menlo Park’s proposed giveaway of heavily used, high-value public lands could benefit big-time real estate developers more than anyone.

After writing the first commentary, the author was invited to attend meetings of the Save Downtown Menlo group when he was visiting Menlo Park and did so. He also donated just over \$300 to the SDM organization in 2025, and communicates regularly with several of its members by email.



2,946

RHNA units required
in MP during 2023–
2031 cycle

556

Parking spaces
presently supplied
by Plazas 1, 2, & 3

345

Downtown rent
restricted units
sought by RFP

68

Housing opportunity
sites listed in
2023-2031 Housing
Element