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SPOTLIGHT

MAYOR AKINS:

CLIMATE CHANGE IS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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CAST YOUR MIND BACK TO AUGUST 2020. The phrase “Almeda Fire” was not a thing. We couldn’t imagine that a U.S. President would refuse to accept electoral defeat--and that his armed supporters would violently attack the Capitol.

Way back then, at the Ashland Climate Action Project of Southern Oregon Climate Action Now, we were eyeing the elections in the shadow of an even larger threat: climate change. With warnings by climate scientists that this decade is most critical, the next Mayor and City Council will have an outsized impact on Ashland’s ability to fulfill its climate responsibility and build resilience. Believing that Ashland voters should hear--in detail!--our candidates’ views on climate change, we organized several zoom candidate forums. Our discussion with mayoral candidates Julie Akins and Tonya Graham transpired just two weeks after the Almeda Fire. We were weary from the ongoing pandemic and traumatized by fire. And yet we persisted.

With Mayor Akins now in the hot seat, the views she shared on climate change during the campaign are more relevant than ever.

She described climate change as “the largest existential threat to our planet and our local community. If anyone was not convinced of that before I think they’re convinced of it now.”

According to Akins, “it’s clear from the climate maps that we’re heading toward desertification. We’re going to have more fires. We have to start thinking about how we’re going to live with that and with drought.”

The Almeda Fire drove home the importance of Ashland’s “Firewise” program (ashland.or.us/firewise). “The safety of our residents comes first. Houses made of fire-resistant

materials, defensible space around houses, and fire-resistant landscapes need to be the norm,” Akins maintained. “We don't want to become a concrete jungle, but we have to help slow fire and save homes or at least give people time to get out.”

Akins averred that implementation of Ashland’s 2017 Climate and Energy Action Plan has lagged. “We have not achieved the eight percent annual emission reduction goal called for in the CEAP,” Akins noted. “We do a good job of planning things but we don't always do a good job of doing them. I'd like to see us move forward. Once we have a plan we need to actually implement it.”

Ashland continues to explore how to reduce car traffic and improve safety for cyclists and pedestrians. “We used to subsidize bus fares; I'd like to find a way to get back to that and get more people on buses,” said Akins. “We need bike lanes to be consistent all the way through town. We could also help Uber and Lyft drivers. If they have a hybrid or an electric car we could offer them a price break on their licensing fee.”

Ashland earns revenue through the Oregon Clean Fuels Program when the city builds electric vehicle charging stations and Ashland residents purchase EVs. Akins spoke in favor of utilizing these funds to continue Ashland’s clean fuel progress, which would further multiply the funds available for these programs. “That's a nice synergy that we can build on,” she said.

The city also offers incentive programs to promote home energy efficiency, water conservation, and EV and e-bike purchasing (ashland.or.us/conserve). While Akins expressed support for these programs she noted that they often benefit residents who don't really need the help. “If we design those programs properly they also can help us meet the needs of low-income people, which furthers our social equity goals.”

Akins is intrigued by the idea of community solar projects that could make solar available to renters, with help from grant funding. “We need to produce more of our own energy,” added Akins, noting that Ashland’s current contract with the Bonneville Power Administration expires in 2028 and will be renegotiated in the coming years. “We need more solar and clean energy, but we have to be careful about how we go about that because we can't afford to raise fees.”

Akins is not a fan of natural gas but recognizes the challenge of phasing it out. Projects like Jordan Cove “are incredibly damaging to our planet,” she asserted, but “many low-income people depend on natural gas for heating their homes because it's cheaper than electricity.”

But at the end of the day, “We're going to need to help people phase out of natural gas,” said Akins.

Still want to hear more? Last fall’s mayoral and city council candidates are available by going to YouTube and searching for the Southern Oregon Climate Action Now YouTube Channel.

Lorrie Kaplan is Chair of the [Ashland Climate Action Project \(ACAP\) of Southern Oregon Climate Action Now](#). She can be reached at ACAPSpotlight@socan.eco. For more information on Ashland’s CEAP goals and targets, visit www.ashland.or.us/climate

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