

Neighborhood interview with City Council candidate John Keener

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 8-27-18–9-2-18



(Jean Bartlett photo)

Not far from his home, John Keener sits at the Rotary Plaza at the Pacifica Center for the Arts.

For centuries, countless visitors have traveled to northern New York's mountainous, unspoiled six-million-acre Adirondack Park. In 1954, writer William Chapman White described its deep, natural magic in his book "Adirondack Country."

"As a man tramps the woods to the lake he knows he will find pines and lilies, blue herons and golden shiners, shadows on the rocks and the glint of light on the wavelets, just as they were in the summer of 1354, as they will be in 2054 and beyond. He can stand on a rock by the shore and be in a past he could not have known, in a future he will never see. He can be a part of time that was and time yet to come."

It was in this place that Pacifican and Pacifica Mayor John Keener first discovered his love of open space, trails and hiking. He was in his late teens and he decided it was time to do a backpacking trip on his own. Never did one before, didn't really have the proper equipment, "and I didn't know any better!" he laughed. He spent two weeks on his own, reveling in his surroundings. His father then joined him and for both men, backpacking in this place was a life changing experience and would begin a countless number of family backpacking trips, including later, with John's own son. For Keener, it also placed him firmly on the path of a dedicated environmentalist.

Born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, John is the eldest of the six children of the late William and Virginia Keener. His father was the Curator of History for the Ohio Historical Society, and was the founding publisher of TIMELINE, the Ohio Historical Society's prize-winning magazine. As for John, now retired, he would go on to become a Ph.D. research biochemist/geneticist and a medical writer. But for his first job, at age 13, he rode the streets of urban Ohio delivering newspapers.

He did that for a couple of years and then was hired as a dishwasher at a local restaurant. Before he graduated from high school, he went to work for a local department store.

"After high school, I had a string of low paying jobs," Keener laughed.

Those jobs included doing home insulation and working at a saw mill. He also traveled a good deal, calling all these places, and a few more, home for a while: Northern Maine, Northern Washington State and Central Washington State. His last job, before heading back to college, was working as an integrated pest manager. He worked for farmers and his job was to solve pest problems while minimizing risks to people and the environment.

He picked research as his field of study because he decided it would always be interesting. He headed back to Ohio, got his undergrad in biology and then took off for graduate school at the University of California, Davis.

"I was really interested in soil," he said. "But there was no discipline at that time that studied soil microbiology, even at UC Davis."

UC Davis faculty member Sydney Kustu took on the graduate student.

"She studied nitrogen uptake and utilization in bacteria," Keener noted. "She was a pioneer both in her field of study and as a woman working in this discipline. I was excited to work for her."

At UC Davis, Keener gave up his "soil" pursuits and focused his graduate work on pure biochemistry and genetics at a molecular level.

"It was at the beginning of DNA sequencing and I was totally into it."

He then headed to the University of California, Irvine and did his postdoc. He worked for molecular biologist Masayasu Nomura, whose scientific focus was the ribosome. (Ribosomes are the protein builders of the cell and they are found in every kind of cell.)

"I stayed with Nomura for about 15 years and then I started doing medical writing. That became so lucrative I gave up my day job."

Keener co-authored numerous articles during his research career. Later, as a medical writer, he wrote primarily for ophthalmological journals. Example: "Evaluation of Quality of Life for Patients with Glaucoma," published January 2006 in the American Journal of Ophthalmology, authors – G. Spaeth, J. Walt, J. Keener.



In 2007, John and Cathleen pose in front of their new Pacifica home.

But it hasn't all been science. Keener attends more than 10 concerts each season of the 152-member San Francisco Symphony Chorus. His wife Cathleen is an alto with the Chorus. She and John have been married 23 years. They moved to Pacifica from Laguna Beach in 2007 when Cathleen got a job with Genentech, Inc. Back then she was a medical writer. Now she works for Genentech in more of a business capacity.

"When we looked around Pacifica and saw all the parks and trails and beautiful views, we fell in love with the city. When we found our house, which is in Linda Mar right along the creek, we really felt lucky and still do."

John retired in 2010 and since then he and Cathleen have added two members to their family, cats Rudy and Ella. On weekends the couple can often be found hiking in San Pedro Valley Park or along the "Old Pedro Mountain Road" at the end of Higgins Way. Mori Point is another favorite, among many Pacifica favorites.

Pacifica is also where Keener discovered his environmental voice in a policy-making capacity. In 2013, he became involved with Pacificans for Highway 1 Alternatives (PH1A). PH1A advocated alternatives to widening Highway 1 in Pacifica.

"I participated in a few demonstrations with them. I remember one time, there were about seven of us at the intersection of Fassler Avenue and Highway 1 holding these signs and it was pouring down rain. All of a sudden, Muna Nash, the owner of Lovey's Tea Shoppe in Rockaway Beach, came running over with sandwiches for us."

Keener said he sees a lot of kindness like this in Pacifica, but this particular kindness helped him to realize that while PH1A demonstrations didn't always arrive with a crowd of participants, there were quite a number of Pacificans that deeply cared about this fight. Keener decided that what was needed were signatures on a petition to show City Council just how many were against the widening of the highway. He went door-to-door throughout his neighborhood and obtained 600 signatures.

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Keener's actions with PH1A were noticed and encouraged and he realized he wanted to be a voice for a number of environmental issues. "I also wanted to be a voice for fiscal

responsibility." He and Cathleen discussed his running for City Council and in 2014, the City Council candidate personally knocked on 7,000 doors. His volunteers knocked on another thousand. In 2015, Keener began the first of his four years on Pacifica's City Council.

On "December 26, 2017, the California Department of Transportation decertified the Final Environmental Impact Report for the State Route 1/Calera Parkway/Highway 1 Widening Project in response to the City of Pacifica's September 11, 2017, Resolution No. 47-2017 requesting that Caltrans 'abandon the proposed widening of Highway 1 and remove it from further consideration.'"

Keener's voice for the environment also placed him as a founding board member of Peninsula Clean Energy, a board he is still very active in.

"PCE was launched collaboratively by the County of San Mateo and all twenty of its cities to help the environment through cleaner energy, while helping customers save money through lower rates." Visit <https://www.peninsulacleanenergy.com/> to learn more about this community choice energy program.

He has also been involved with the San Francisco International Airport/Community Roundtable, <http://sforoundtable.org/>. The Roundtable was established in 1981 as a voluntary committee to address community noise impacts from aircraft operations at San Francisco International Airport (SFO). New flight procedures implemented by the Federal Aviation Administration "which were meant to reduce the amount of noise residents experience," have actually increased the noise in various areas, including Pacifica, where aircraft noise was not previously heard.

"I am Councilmember Sue Digre's alternate," Keener said. "She has been Pacifica's lead on this and she is absolutely right that flight noise is a potential public health matter."

Keener explained there is a science to how people hear and react to certain decibels and what happens to them physiologically, and that is something that the FAA needs to hear. Congresswoman Jackie Speier is also a proponent of the Roundtable. Read her "Amendment to Reduce Noise and Health Impacts of Air Traffic included in FAA Reauthorization" at <https://speier.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-speier-s-amendment-reduce-noise-and-health-impacts-air-traffic>.

All of these things have been part or are part of Keener's fight to protect Pacifica, which includes his fight to protect "our parks and open spaces, beaches, wildlife, and creeks" and to place "bluff erosion, climate change and sea level rise" at the top of his "priorities" list. This is why he is running for his second term on City Council.

"I don't favor managed retreat, which might allow, for instance, the ocean to flood homes in Fairway Park. The Council adopted several goals for the process but the main one was to protect existing homes and businesses from bluff erosion or sea level rise.

"I am committed to finding state or federal funding for a new sea wall, a replacement not patches. What is currently there is more of a retaining wall, not a real sea wall. It just holds the sand back that's behind it."

Keener is also committed to amending the City's general plan. The general plan is about land use, housing, transportation, conservation, noise, safety, open space and environmental justice. (Visit John on Facebook or the candidate's Google site, <https://sites.google.com/site/johnkeenerforpacificacc/>, for more information.)

"The local coastal plan, the same type of document, just applies to the area west of Highway 1 in Pacifica that is under Coastal Commission regulation. The general plan applies to that and the rest of the City. Right now we are trying to get the sea level rise portion of the local coastal plan written up. The general plan has not had a real update since 1983. That old version has stood the test of time surprisingly well, but now it is behind the times."

Keener said that one of Pacifica's greatest assets is its residents. They work hard to keep their beaches and neighborhoods clean. They work hard to support the migrating steelhead trout in San Pedro Creek. They work hard to restore the Pedro Point Headlands.

"The restoration of the Pedro Point Headlands was done by the Pacifica Land Trust, <http://www.pacifica-land-trust.org/celebration-may-18-2018.html>, and it's beautiful. The goal now is to find a way to get a trail built up there from Ace Hardware to the Headlands. But I know that Pacificans will make it happen."

Could he ever have imagined his backpacking excursion in the Adirondacks as a teen would have made him care so much about a city almost 3,000 miles away?

"The beauty of a community, which to me is its environment, is an overall indicator of the health of that community and the health of our place in the world. Being here in Pacifica is really quite wonderful."



Jean Bartlett photo
Ella acknowledges the end of the interview.



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.