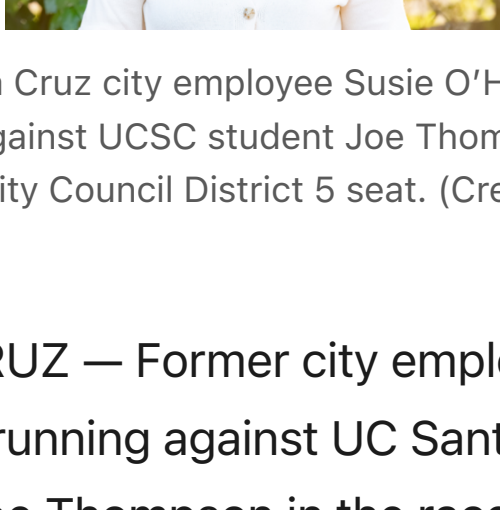


Former city employee Susie O'Hara vies for District 5

Seat decided in March

Aric Sleeper • January 26, 2024 at 4:43 p.m.



Former Santa Cruz city employee Susie O'Hara is competing against UCSC student Joe Thompson for the Santa Cruz City Council District 5 seat. (Credit: Crystal Birns)

SANTA CRUZ — Former city employee Susie O'Hara is running against UC Santa Cruz student Joe Thompson in the race for the Santa Cruz City Council's 5th District seat.

O'Hara has served on local boards and commissions and in various roles for the city and county for almost two decades. She is currently a water utility consultant and resides on the campus of UCSC with her family.

"I moved to Santa Cruz in 2006 with my husband who got a teaching position here in the history department," said O'Hara. "Right when we moved here, I applied to be on the city's Water Commission and was appointed to that. And by virtue of getting on the commission, and being the only woman and probably 30 years younger than the rest of the commissioners, I started to be asked to get involved with local civic, community-based groups and the Santa Cruz NEXT board. And things launched from there."

O'Hara's role on the Water Commission later led to a job at the Santa Cruz Water Department as she is also a registered civil engineer. At the Water Department, O'Hara worked on the city's proposed [desalination project](#), which received significant community opposition and never manifested. After the desalination project lost traction, O'Hara began to work at the Santa Cruz city manager's office, which was then under the leadership of Martin Bernal.

"The city was going through a significant public safety challenge," said O'Hara. "Our officers were killed. We had a number of violent crimes all in a row and there had been this Youtube video of a cave at Cowell's with discarded syringes and people were really upset. I ended up running the public safety task force for the city manager's office."

Following her work on the 2013 task force, O'Hara became the program coordinator for the Downtown Accountability Program, which started in April 2014 to reduce public drunkenness, drug use and trespassing in downtown Santa Cruz. It brought law enforcement, prosecutors and mental health service providers together to identify the city's repeat offenders and connect them with drug and mental health services.

"The program was really successful and then it evolved and the county oversees the program now," said O'Hara. "It's really focused on jail diversion and mental health and substance use treatment for folks that are cycling in and out of the criminal justice system."

During that time O'Hara also worked as an analyst for then Third District Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ryan Coonerty, who supports O'Hara's current City Council campaign. After about a year working for the supervisor's office, she went back to the city's manager office and left about three years ago. She now works as an adviser for a national nonprofit focused on water utilities.

After the three-year hiatus from city government, O'Hara wants to immerse herself in local civic life once again and this time on the Santa Cruz City Council.

"I really wanted to get back involved with community discussions and leadership and back into the mindset of looking across the community at the challenges that we are facing," said O'Hara. "It's something that I've thought about for a long time but I was always working for the city. Water engineering is a really specialized field and my interests are a lot more varied than that so it seemed like a meaningful time for me to dive in."

Whoever wins the seat for the newly-formed 5th District, which includes portions of the upper downtown and the Westside, Harvey West neighborhood, the Pogonip and the UCSC campus, will replace Santa Cruz City Councilmember Sandy Brown, who will term out at the end of 2024.

Thompson, her opponent in the race, began his campaign last summer and was the first person to get their name on the District 5 ballot. O'Hara announced her candidacy in late November and has been knocking on doors and speaking with community members since she threw her hat in the race.

"District 5 is a complex and diverse district," said O'Hara. "Living up on campus, and with my husband having the provost position, we have seen how difficult the transition is for the kids, post-covid, to move into the dorms and find their way into the community, and I think there is a significant need for somebody on the City Council to be paying closer attention to relationships between students and community members, particularly in neighborhoods."

Outside of the university campus but still in District 5, O'Hara is focused on looking into fire insurance issues for homeowners near the Pogonip, how to better utilize Harvey West Park and the Tannery Arts Center, supporting new and existing businesses in Harvey West and helping new families and seniors in the district, among others.

"I see those as the book ends," said O'Hara. "How to support our young families and how to support our seniors."

Moving toward the March election, O'Hara is continuing to canvas the district and speak to residents about their concerns and her experience with city government.

"My hopes are that I can use my knowledge and interest and excitement to really make an impact at city hall," said O'Hara. "I hope to work with current and newly-elected council members to continue make progress downtown, continue to engage with the community about housing and affordability and really look at the nuts and bolts of city services and shine a light on what we do really well."