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Q&A: Meet Mara Elliott, candidate for California State Senate District 40

Mara Elliott, 57, is a Democrat and former San Diego city attorney.



City Attorney Mara Elliott stands outside the California Theatre building on Thursday, April 27, 2023, in San Diego. (Adriana Heldiz / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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Mara Elliott, 57, a Democrat and former San Diego city attorney, is running for state Senate in District 40, representing San Marcos, Escondido, Poway, Santee, northern San Diego neighborhoods and unincorporated areas such as Fallbrook and Ramona.

Elliott, who is originally from Orange County, lives in the Scripps Ranch neighborhood of San Diego.

The San Diego Union-Tribune emailed a series of questions to Elliott and other candidates to help inform voters about their positions, priorities and plans if elected.

Elliott said she did not use any AI tools in responding to the Union-Tribune's questions.

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1) Why are you running, and what makes you the best candidate? (150 words max)

I am running for State Senate to put my experience as a seasoned public sector attorney to work for District 40. As the elected San Diego city attorney, I used my office to fight for fair pay, safe working conditions, access to healthcare, safe and affordable housing and public safety.

I accomplished a great deal as San Diego city attorney: launching San Diego's groundbreaking and nationally recognized response to gun violence; relaunching the city's family justice center, the nation's first provider of free and comprehensive services for victims of domestic violence; expanding the family justice center to provide vital services to survivors of sex trafficking and elder abuse; spearheading a dedicated shelter for victims of domestic violence and their children; creating the office's first affirmative civil enforcement unit to protect consumers, workers and the environment from unscrupulous businesses; and more. I am running to continue this work on behalf of District 40.

2) What are the top 3 issues facing this district? (150 words max)

Affordability (including housing), access to essential services like healthcare and education and public safety.

3) What are the first 3 things you would do in office if elected? (150 words max)

Expand housing access by introducing new and viable solutions that will benefit young adults and families who are trying to build a sustainable life in our community. The solution must include businesses that currently struggle to attract and retain talent because of the high cost of living.

Address the childcare crisis that is crippling families by creating incentives for businesses to provide their employees with safe and affordable childcare options.

Use my experience as the city's prosecutor to reduce homelessness by investing in behavioral health services and ensuring our laws protect crime victims while achieving a fair and just result.

4) What should California do to solve its shortage of affordable housing and curb homelessness? Which existing efforts do you believe are working, and which aren't? (150 words max)

I support policies like AB 1820, which provide developers with financial certainty and predictability when estimating the cost of local impact fees on proposed housing projects, encouraging more needed affordable housing, as well as AB 301, which ensures that housing projects are not stalled by removing red tape and establishing firm timelines for state agencies involved in housing development reviews. Bureaucracy should not get in the way of increasing our housing supply in the middle of a crisis.

I would also like to encourage the development of condominiums (which was the first home my husband and I bought) and starter homes like the one I grew up in. I believe public-private partnerships will provide some solutions.

5) This district and its neighbors are vulnerable to climate change impacts like wildfires, rising seas and extreme heat, and to the health effects of climate-warming emissions. What should California do to improve climate resilience and reduce emissions and fire risk? (150 words max)

Wildfire risks are some of the most important concerns in District 40. We're located in a highly volatile fire corridor (the devastating wildfires of 2003 and 2007 occurred in my home community of Scripps Ranch). I want to work with the insurance industry to ensure access to insurance coverage that is fair and affordable, and with our firefighters to ensure a healthy and well-trained workforce and a sustainable roadmap to attract and retain recruits.

We also need to invest in a clean energy economy, invest in climate-resilient infrastructure and reduce wildfire risk through prescribed burns, forest thinning and stricter building codes in fire-prone areas, while limiting development in high-risk zones. Engaging and incentivizing public participation will be key.

6) Laws enshrined in California's Constitution that protect residents from tax increases have also painted local governments into a corner as they seek to fund basic services and have led to chronic underfunding of schools. What would you do about this? For instance, would you support changes to Proposition 13 to remove its protections for commercial properties? (150 words)

I agree that we need reforms to better equip local governments to fund basic services, including public safety, healthcare, and our schools. I support changes to Prop. 13 that keep protections for homeowners but reassess large commercial and industrial properties, providing much needed additional revenue. Such reforms must include protections for small businesses and strong accountability so that new funds are invested as intended.

Finally, the state should rebalance school funding formulas, reduce reliance on volatile income taxes and give local governments more options to ensure communities can sustainably fund what they need. I am looking forward to using my significant experience as an attorney with expertise in finance and auditing to scrutinize the state's budget and find line items that can be eliminated or reduced while bolstering the essential services Californians expect their legislature to provide and protect.

7) In light of those constraints, along with federal funding cuts, how should California balance its budget and fund basic services? Where would you seek new revenues or savings? (150 words)

As mentioned, I would look to reforms like reasonable changes to Prop. 13. I also support ensuring big corporations, like utilities, pay their fair share so that working families aren't saddled with the burden while corporations make record profits.

8) Speaking of spending, Californians consistently rank the cost of living as a big concern. Recent jumps in the costs of fuel, food and other goods — combined with federal cuts to safety-net programs, new limits on certain federal loans and more — are further squeezing residents who were already struggling. What relief would you seek to offer, and how? (150 words max)

As the mother of two college students, I appreciate how difficult it is to make ends meet. Families are forced to choose between food, gas, housing, education and healthcare costs. Too many are being priced out of the communities they grew up in, and many work more than one job just to survive. We must find creative ways to ensure everyone can access housing that is safe and affordable. It is encouraging that some school districts and law enforcement agencies provide support for housing and childcare for their workforce. I think some of our region's major employers would be willing to explore public-private partnerships that increase workforce stability. There are also laws that should be amended to reduce the risk of building new housing, and we should explore tax incentives that encourage corporate investment. We can and we must do better.

9) President Trump has made cracking down on immigration a cornerstone of his administration, ordering widespread arrests and detentions of immigrants nationwide and directing military resources to a new military zone along the U.S.-Mexico border. What impact have these actions had on this district? What are your goals on immigrants, immigration and the border, and how would you pursue them in the Legislature? What is your message to constituents who are immigrants? (150 words max)

Trump's immigration policies are rooted in hate, racism and authoritarianism and are out of step with what the majority of Americans support.

No one should work hard for their communities and families and be scared to be kidnapped off the street by unidentified ICE agents in masks. No one should be scared for their safety simply because of the color of their skin or where they work. Children should not have to worry that their parents may not pick them up from school and may never return home. Victims should not hesitate to report a crime, and no one should postpone healthcare or avoid our courts — but that's happening right now because of fear and mistrust.

As the city's prosecutor, and as the daughter of an immigrant, I worked hard to build trust with our diverse communities because we're safer when our residents trust law enforcement and report criminal activity.

10) Health care costs for many Californians are rising — some because of new federal eligibility requirements. some because of Gov. Gavin

To rein in costs, we must hold accountable insurance companies that delay and deny care. The Departments of Managed Health Care and Insurance should be empowered to review and reject rate hikes, require clear justification for increases and ensure more dollars go to care, and not to profits or administration.

Immigrants work millions of essential jobs and contribute to our state's \$4.1 trillion economy. Their health is worth the investment. If the state doesn't provide coverage, overburdened health centers and emergency rooms absorb the cost, which will be passed on to consumers, and some health centers may fold.

11) Among the many ballot measures being pursued by lawmakers and citizens for the November ballot are a handful that have drawn much attention and money. Should each of the below measures qualify for the November ballot, would you personally vote for measures that would do the following? (50 words max per measure)

— make ride-hail companies like Uber and Lyft liable for sexual assaults committed in cars?

Yes

— require voters to provide a government-issued ID each time they vote?

No

— levy a one-time 5% wealth tax on people with over \$1 billion in assets?

Yes

— pass \$10 billion in bonds to fund affordable housing development?

Yes

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