

Questions for City Council Candidates

1) Given what will likely be typical silence from the State of Texas, and the host of other challenges Council must address, how important is it to you that Austin take meaningful action to combat the climate crisis next year? What do you propose the city should do?

We must do everything we can to combat the climate crisis. Our communities, especially low income neighborhoods, are already experiencing significant impacts and it's getting worse every year. 90 percent of our carbon emissions in Austin come from two sources: 1) energy generation and 2) transportation. We have massively accelerated our renewable energy portfolio at Austin Energy. When I came onto Council, there was still talk of building a new gas plant. Instead, we've now made major wind and solar investments-- which will move us from a 37% renewable energy portfolio in 2018 to over 60% renewable in 2021. This is six years ahead of our aggressive schedule, and we must continue to accelerate this work. Of all the major city electric utilities in the country, no other city is ahead of us on decarbonizing our utility, including shutting down our portion of the Fayette Coal Plant imminently. (The only cleaner major utility is in Seattle, but they have always relied on 90% of their energy from hydroelectric sources so they have not gone through the same dirty to clean transition we are going through).

However, we will not reach our goal of total carbon neutrality by 2050 if we do not stop relying on single occupancy fossil fuel cars as our primary way of getting around. A recent city audit showed that this is the area where we have not made even close to enough progress. That is why I and others have prioritized putting a comprehensive and all-electric mass transit system on the ballot, alongside a major sidewalks and bike lanes proposal, this year. The mass transit proposal also includes an unprecedented \$300M in anti-displacement funds-- we have found no other city in America that has included such a significant commitment to low income housing preservation as part of its transit plan. We also have created legally binding requirements for union wages and living wages, along with community oversight of working conditions, as part of the plan. This will create thousands of green jobs in our community by building sidewalks and bike lanes, and engineering a real rail and rapid bus system, and will get hundreds of thousands of people out of their cars and out of traffic.

2) The lack of federal leadership on COVID-19 has deepened many preexisting inequalities. As a city, what do we need to do to ensure we build back better?

COVID-19 has been devastating for all of Austin, but has been so much more damaging to low income people and communities of color especially. My office is constantly in touch with families who have loved ones in isolation, in the hospital, or in recovery, along with families who have been economically devastated, or who have even lost a loved one.

My first priority has been saving lives. When the Governor overturned many of our safety rules, I worked tirelessly to champion new construction safety standards and other rules, and then to have those standards enforced. When workers were being tested for COVID-19 and then were being sent back to work, we've been expanding our legal resources and know-your-rights materials to be handed out at all testing sites to ensure workers advocate for their federal right to emergency sick leave. Mayor Pro Tem Garza and I were the two lead sponsors for the emergency creation of the RISE Fund, and I have championed the eviction moratorium and the expanded RENT program to ensure families-- but especially our low income families and people of color-- get the economic help they need, and do not have to make impossible choices between their health and paying their rent. We must continue to lead the way in not requiring social security numbers for these critical programs.

Moving forward, I am pushing to ensure limited public health resources are focused on areas of greatest need: Latino and immigrant communities especially are in need of additional outreach and public health/economic resources. We need to ensure relief dollars are getting into the hands of working class people. We must continue to target our most impacted zip codes.

We must ensure that a COVID recovery is inclusive of essential workers. We must demand that resources for recovery are dedicated to workforce development, creates opportunities for labor organizing, and does not perpetuate the inequality that is being exacerbated in the pandemic.

Furthermore, we must never stop holding our federal and state government accountable for their failures that put us in this position in the first place.

3) If elected to the city council, what will you do to ensure that every Austin resident has access to safe, stable shelter?

I've been fighting to make transformational change in housing policy in our city-- otherwise, primarily working class communities of color like District 4 will eventually cease to exist. The City must reprioritize its investments to focus more on affordable housing. Recent efforts to change the city's priorities include

- I led the effort to get \$250M in affordable housing on the 2018 ballot, the largest low cost housing bond in Texas history

- I helped get \$300M in anti-displacement dollars packaged into the Project Connect referendum this year

- I co-led the effort to establish an Equity Overlay within the new land development code, to ensure that communities vulnerable to gentrification have additional protections as we add new housing; while also ensuring we add new housing in a city, because the current land development code is part of our accelerating housing prices.

- Helped establish and fund the RENT program, which is providing nearly \$20M to help cover residents' housing costs who've lost their jobs or income due to COVID

- Sponsored the Anti-Eviction ordinance that, paired with the Mayor's Anti-Eviction order, is keeping families from being evicted due to COVID-19's health and economic effects

- Helped establish BASTA, a tenants rights organization that organizes primarily tenants of color; and will push for expanding more tenants rights

- Protected mobile home communities that had previously been rezoned for commercial development, by rezoning them back to mobile home. Worked with one of these communities to establish the first cooperatively owned (rather than corporate owned) mobile home parks in the city.

- Will work to expand tenant ownership of buildings, public ownership of buildings, and expand a city-based housing voucher program.

- Stop prosecuting homelessness as a crime, and instead provide hundreds of units of supportive housing

Housing affordability must also be paired with better treatment of working people, so that they can afford housing

- Raised the wage to \$15/hour where we are allowed to in Texas-- all city contractors doing city work, all city employees including temporary staff, all workers for businesses

partnering with the city (such as those at the airport, etc.)

- Paid Sick leave ordinance (currently held up in court)

- Fair Chance Hiring so that people are given a shot at an interview regardless of whether they are formerly incarcerated

4) Recent protests have underscored just how many people don't feel safe when contacting the authorities. What concrete steps does council need to take to ensure all Austinites are safe in our city? On what timeline?

We must end needless police violence in our community. I've worked on this alongside impacted families consistently, and we still have so, so far to go.

- Authored the budget amendment to re-write APD's use of force policies and put community groups at the table, resulting in a more progressive policy that requires de-escalation

- Authored the Freedom Cities resolution which has reduced discretionary arrests for Class C and many Class B misdemeanors, resulting in a 75% reduction in discretionary arrests that overwhelmingly impacted communities of color (discretion was much more often used to arrest POC) for things like driving with a suspended license

- Sponsored the policy change that has led to an end of all personal marijuana citations and arrests in Austin-- prior to the policy change, Black Austinites were 7 times more likely to be arrested for POM than Anglo Austinites, despite equal usage across races. Disproportionate stops and arrests in communities of color are drivers of needless police violence, as we have seen with the violence against Breion King and many others

- Led in the budget creation of mental health first responders. Police should not be the lead responders for so many of our mental health calls. Alternative response could protect so many lives. David Joseph should have had a mental health first response, rather than a police response that ended in him being killed so brutally and unjustifiably.

- Voted No on the police contract and worked to ensure community members demanding police accountability and transparency were a part of the process throughout negotiations, leading to the creation of the Office of Police Oversight, the ability for anonymous complaints to be filed, a new body camera release policy, and more.

-Sponsored and co-sponsored audits of policing policy and training, bans on racially biased facial recognition technology, bans on use of bean bag guns and sonic weapons on protesters, privacy policies and elimination of needless no-knock warrants, and more.

Despite all of the efforts above, we continue to see a system of policing that does not meet this moment and does not meet our community values. This is why we led the nation in transforming Austin's budget, to reduce our over-reliance on policing as our local government's response to inequality, racial injustice, poverty, and structural inequity. I support those who call for a total re-thinking in how we use mass incarceration to put people "away" rather than investing in community solutions that address the root causes of harm and violence in community. I am proud and supportive of the actions our City took to reallocate tens of millions of dollars to family violence shelter, services for people experiencing homelessness, COVID response, victim services, and more, and to separate functions like Internal Affairs and the Forensics lab away from APD. We must dedicate ourselves to this reimagining work over the course of the coming year, and we will make continued budget adjustments every quarter to continue this work.