

## Questions for City Council Candidates

Pooja Sethi, Candidate for Austin City Council - District 10

**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?**

Austin City Council needs a leader in the region and aggressively combat the climate crisis. Austin has already experienced the effects of climate change, with our increased risk of wildfires and flooding which are the result of droughts and extreme temperatures, like the record-setting summer of 2019. I have served on the city's Climate Equity Plan Steering Committee since 2019, where we set bold goals to make Austin a cleaner, greener city.

As a city, we need to take steps to mitigate and prevent these problems. We need infrastructure to ensure Austinites do not lose their homes to flooding or fires. We should take steps to reduce sprawl and make our city more affordable. Reducing sprawl will lower our risk of wildfires and protect current ecosystems and wildlife. Additionally, any land development code revisions should aim to reduce impervious cover to combat flooding. We also need parks and pools for Austinites, especially during the summer but also for overall well-being. As we take steps to combat the current effects of climate change, we must be proactive to make Austin more sustainable.

I would also support a Green New Deal in Austin which means electrified buses, sustainable buildings, green jobs, and workforce training, increasing tree canopy equitably across the city, and ensure Austinites have access to healthy foods. I support increasing renewable energy generation and ceasing the production of power generated at the Fayette County Power Plant. I would work to increase affordable housing, public transportation, and support workers to create an Austin where residents don't struggle to find a home or get around.

To accomplish these bold goals, I will work to create a green jobs program that includes a training that supports green infrastructure, solar installation, and tree and landscape maintenance. We can support our tree canopy by creating a city-wide tree service, partnering with local organizations to educate communities about tree health, and add tree maintenance and care to the City's Minor Home Repair Grants Program. We can also need to give funds to local HOAs and low-income homeowners to help with tree care and solar installation. Furthermore, I support increased public transportation to reduce traffic on our roads so we can meet our goals to reduce carbon emissions. I would advocate for smart growth in Austin to create housing near any public transit plan that we implement. Transit-oriented development will make our neighborhoods more accessible and less car-dependent with more sidewalks, urban trails, and bike lanes.

Finally, any discussion about combating the climate crisis is incomplete without a focus on climate justice. We need to recognize that communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities are more likely to live near toxic plants and sites, more likely to breathe in polluted air causing these communities to suffer asthma, illness, and cancer. In Austin, we further segregation through our zoning laws, our lack of transportation options, and our extreme wealth disparities across the city. To make this a city where everyone can be healthy, regardless of where they live, we need to reduce pollution, move or eliminate toxic

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plants and sites, and close the wage gap in Austin. We need affordable housing near people's work, increased public transportation, and a real plan to significantly lower our carbon emissions to make Austin an equitable city.

### **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?**

My top priorities for families affected by the pandemic would be food security, developing a cohesive, coordinated response, and ensuring our black and brown communities who have been disparately affected, receive the support they need. I support increasing resources in our underserved communities, especially those that are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic.

I supported RISE through my work on the Asian American Quality of Life Commission. Additionally, I advocated for measures to protect our undocumented communities who applied for RISE funds. I would advocate for community engagement and feedback on the initial dispersal of funds to understand how funds were allocated. As we continue to support our community, we should strive to improve the process and target any gaps or missed opportunities. I would support granting funds directly to individuals and families in addition to working with nonprofits. Families and individuals understand their needs best and can invest in the community directly.

I support more proactive enforcement because the rules need to be followed to avoid another spike. These standards benefit workers, employers, and Austin as a whole. I would work to implement a contact tracing plan that ensures the privacy and anonymity of the affected party and their contacts while providing public health officials with the necessary information to control the spread. The plan will include education resources that highlight the public health value of contact tracing and guarantee anonymous participation.

As a member of City Council, I would implement the following:

1. More testing sites in neighborhoods with communities of color.
2. Implementing a plan to provide masks to all Austinites when a mask ordinance is in place.
3. I would support businesses that take measures towards providing emergency paid sick time, which is important for the safety and health of our workforce. I would support these measures regardless of the employer size or type of work. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gaps in our systems and inequities that our communities encounter due to inadequate protections.
4. I would look to partner with local health providers to support and grow programs like MAP. I would look into creating a medical trust for communities affected by COVID-19 that helps them stay home and recover from their injuries. This support system allows for families to alleviate fear around food insecurity,

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medical costs for healthcare resulting from a Covid 19, and also measures to keep other family members safe from infection.

5. Finally, our small businesses in Austin are closing at a high rate during this pandemic, impacting our communities of color. We need to develop long-term solutions to support minority and women-owned businesses in our communities and ensure that we are increasing the grants that we are giving to businesses of color.

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

Making Austin more affordable is a priority for me. On City Council, I would support increasing housing density in collaboration with existing communities to make the city more affordable. Without an increase in housing options and housing overall, Austin won't be able to sustain its growth. A recent study by Move.org found that Austin is the least livable U.S. city for minimum-wage workers. Thus, I support the creation of an Anti-Displacement Office to ensure our city remains affordable and people are not getting pushed out of our city. We also need to provide equitable resources throughout the city and create a real plan to finally desegregate Austin. The current land development code only increases segregation in our city. We need to come up with a real housing plan that provides for more multi-family and mixed-use housing in Austin.

As we make plans to increase public transportation, we should make a coordinated effort to increase housing so that our city is more affordable and accessible. Thus, we need a housing plan that addresses and helps reduce mobility barriers and utilizes our city's resources efficiently.

Finally, we need to invest in long-term options to help people experiencing homelessness. For example, the Community First Village and The Other Ones Foundation get people back on their feet and help them attain sustainable housing. I support funding services to meet the needs of our homeless communities, as well as the decriminalization of homelessness.

We also need more complete data of those experiencing homelessness to better address the problem, which means accounting for people experiencing chronic homelessness, as well as those who may be experiencing transitional or episodic homelessness, be it sleeping in a car or couch surfing. A comprehensive picture of the state of homelessness is essential to provide the services and systems necessary to help these vulnerable communities, thus we need to reach out to people to understand the drivers of homelessness. Some of these barriers include a lack of affordable housing, stagnant wages, as well as limited access to city resources including treatment options and mental health services. Until we start truly working on assessing and dismantling barriers for people in Austin, we cannot move forward as an equitable community.

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### **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?**

Through my work at the Office of Police oversight and the Mayor's Task Force on Institutional Racism and System Inequities, I know that every Austinite should feel safe, and currently many do not. As a woman of color, a mother, and an immigration attorney, I understand how important justice is for everyone. Every day I advocate for racial justice and work for a more fair public safety system because I understand what happens when the system doesn't work. Too often in my work, I see people who are detained by ICE, because they ran a stop sign and were taken to the Travis County Jail by APD.

Austin should be safe and welcoming for everyone, including our immigrant communities, and we need policies in place to make that a reality. Public input is crucial for an effective public safety system. I would work to ensure every voice is heard--by holding town halls, implementing anonymous survey tools, and create resources to ensure those facing domestic violence would not be afraid to get help and be heard when they express concerns.

Furthermore, I know through my work that the most vulnerable populations in Austin do not receive the services they need most. So as we reimagine public safety, I have developed a community center plan to bring resources into our neighborhoods. These community centers would provide access to city services and be tailored to the needs of the district including emergency health and mental health providers, domestic violence resources, property investigators, and services for people facing homelessness, that are more integrated into the community. Improved access to health and safety resources would likely reduce the need to call the police in inappropriate situations and more effectively use the city's resources. My vision for these community centers is to provide a resource hub in the community and create a neutral environment where people can get access to our first responders and the city resources they need.

Finally, we need to increase implicit bias training and diversity training along with continued professional development among our first responders. This will be essential to ensure any law enforcement are prepared to interact with the entire community, especially our communities of color. I also support a change in hiring practices that will help shift the culture of the force away from a punitive one to a protective one. While I do understand the urgent need for change, I also understand that we have deep-rooted racism and systemic inequities in our systems that need to be addressed. Doing this will require great time and planning; it is not something we can or should take shortcuts on. I have a history of taking action to make our city more just, and I am committed to taking the time necessary to make our city safer and truly dismantle racism at every level in Austin.