

University Democrats - 2020 Questionnaire

Candidate: **Alison Alter**

Office: **Re-election Austin City Council, District 10**

Website: <http://www.alisonalter.com>

Facebook: **@AlisonAlterforAustin**

Twitter: **@ALTERforATX**

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?

Sustainability, environmental progress, and combating the climate crisis have been among my top priorities since entering office in 2017.

I have:

- Led Austin's **declaration of a climate emergency** and advanced ambitious efforts to make our climate safer;
- Created the **Austin Civilian Conservation Corps**;
- **Increased our renewable energy goals** without increasing our utility rates;
- Championed the **electrification of our citywide transportation infrastructure** ;
- **Promoted climate resilience planning and investment** as a matter of public health and public safety;
- **Reformed pesticide regulations** on city owned land to prevent harm to our water supply and bee population;
- **Been awarded Treefolks' Urban Forest Hero Award** for being a stalwart champion for Austin's urban forest;
- **Advanced Water Forward**, Austin's 100-year plan to ensure a sufficient water supply;
- Advocated for significant bond funding to **purchase water conservation lands and mitigate flooding**;
- **Established an Austin Water Oversight committee** to ensure our utility is fiscally and environmentally sustainable;
- **Increased investments in our parks and trails** while in office and as a parks advocate beforehand;
- **Facilitated city efforts to purchase parkland**, including the Bull Creek property;
- **Elevated the environment** to be included as one of the six strategic outcomes in Strategic Direction 2023;
- **Engaged Texas Gas** to be proactive and innovative in reducing natural gas leakage and helping Austin better conserve energy;
- **Advanced the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan**, including its 50% mode share goals;

- **Advocated for Traffic Demand Management methods** at CAMPO and a **review of the city's telecommuting policy** in light of COVID; and
- **Supported adoption of Project Connect**, a comprehensive light rail and bus system.

In my second term, I will continue the fight. I will work every day to make our city greener and more sustainable, with equity and environmental justice serving as the bedrocks of our policies and strategies. In particular I will focus on water quality, wildfire mitigation, reducing our carbon emissions, and increasing our use of renewable energy. I've been a strong supporter of our SOS ordinance and other water quality regulations. We must continue to be ambitious in acquiring water quality protection lands and in reducing impervious cover in our fragile watersheds. I've also done all I can to support organizations working to prevent the permit application that would enable Dripping Springs to release treated wastewater into Onion Creek, and I'll continue those efforts. Fighting to ensure we have a safe and secure water supply is something I will always prioritize as we move forward with implementation of our Water Forward plan.

I've worked extensively with advocates and Austin Energy leadership to implement policies that increase our renewable energy goals and usage without requiring us to raise rates. In March we adopted our new resource generation plan. Therein we committed to exiting the coal-fired Fayette Power Project (FPP) by the end of 2022 and approved the new REACH approach that is allowing us to drastically reduce emissions from the plant in the meantime. I'll ensure we reach those goals and also live up to our commitment to retire usage of the Decker Steam gas-fired units. Furthermore, I'm a supporter of the Equitable Green Jobs grant program in the City's Innovation Office, which supports equitable access to green jobs. I have supported the City's Green Building Policy, and the Office of Sustainability's efforts to update these policies to align with best practices in creating more sustainable structures in Austin. This fall we should adopt the Austin Climate Equity Plan 2020.

With your help we can make it happen. We are in a climate emergency, and we need to treat it like one. That means we need proven leaders who can work with city staff and community leaders to get things done.

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?

I believe we can turn the current crises into catalysts for solving problems that have challenged our community for too long.

The fact is that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color and laid bare inequalities in our city. First and foremost we must respond to the critical health needs facing vulnerable communities. For instance, I have had several meetings with Latinx leaders to check in on the City barriers and response gaps. After each meeting, I have elevated a series of specific concerns and questions to City executive leadership and pushed for quicker, more

comprehensive response efforts. For example, I pressed Austin Public Health and the City Manager's Office for:

- more testing in communities of color including more free testing, especially on the weekends;
- higher prioritization of PPE access for disproportionately impacted communities of color;
- greater provision of financial resources for those who have tested positive so that they could stay home; and
- improving the City's messaging and marketing to better connect with the Latinx community and non-English speaking communities.

I have worked to coordinate mass PPE donations for the Austin Latino Coalition to give to community members in need and my office has volunteered to help distribute PPE in Dove Springs.

In the last few months, we have declared racism a public health crisis and invested significant resources in EMS (ambulances and staffing) that will help the city provide better COVID response and better health care. I initiated the creation of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer which will increase access to physician's services, improve clinical oversight and position us to leverage new funding sources to provide better health care via our EMS services.

In the last 6 months I also have worked with my council colleagues to provide direct financial assistance to vulnerable Austinites through the Relief in a State of Emergency (RISE) fund and Relief of Emergency Needs for Tenants (RENT). We are partnering with local organizations such as El Buen Samaritano, Catholic Charities, and the Austin Family Independence Initiative. We also have supported food distribution programs through our school districts that also help local restaurants stay in business.

Stabilizing our economy through COVID to recovery and beyond is one of my top priorities. This spring I, along with several of my colleagues, designated tens of millions of dollars for grants to small businesses, nonprofits, childcare centers, and the creative sector. I also have made workforce development a key part of my COVID response, launching the Austin Civilian Conservation Corps (ACCC), a program based on the original New Deal program and embodies the tenets of the Green New Deal. The ACCC employs Austinites who have been economically impacted by the COVID-19 crisis to work on conservation projects. It also features a strong workforce development and training component to help participants advance in green careers. I also helped secure funding for phase 1 of the ambitious "Make It Pay" Workforce Solutions Central Texas training program.

Moving forward, I am focused on short and long term economic recovery and public health fortification. We must ensure our community is uplifted from the multi-pronged crises they face, and we must build a more resilient and equitable Austin so this never happens again. I am serving on the Council's Economic Recovery Cabinet and we are working on ways to further

make sure our small businesses, nonprofits, childcare and creative sector have what they need to continue to contribute to our community.

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

For too long the City invested money to address homelessness and our only metric of success was whether the money was spent; those days are over. To target our investments, we must remember that homelessness has many profiles. We have children who have aged out of foster care, families fleeing domestic violence, people actively working but who can't afford rent, individuals struggling with abuse and addiction or mental health. All of these profiles require different interventions, and those interventions are now being aligned. Where we have targeted our efforts as we did a few years ago for veterans and now towards ending youth homelessness, we have seen real results. In January, for instance, we partnered with LifeWorks to fund a new housing development, the Works II in East Austin. This initiative allowed us to expand shelter and housing options for young parents exiting homelessness, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth who are aging out of the foster care system. By the first quarter of 2021 we should reach our goal of ending youth homelessness in Austin.

We know we need more housing for single adults experiencing homelessness. In the last year we added emergency overnight shelter capacity for families through the newly opened Salvation Army Rathgeber Center for Families. This step also allowed the Salvation Army downtown shelter to focus on sheltering single adults. We also have added a number of units of permanent supportive housing in the city.

We also need a bridge between emergency shelter and permanent supportive housing. Bridge housing is necessary to stabilize single adults and transition them into self-sufficiency. Collaboration between our staff and service providers led them to establish the Motel Conversion Strategy.

The City is acquiring motels to convert into single occupancy units that offer stability and wrap around services. The City intends to deploy 300 units total. The City initiated its first motel purchase late last year and finalized the transaction this Spring. Due to the pandemic, the facility is being utilized for temporary shelter services. Once the pandemic is clear, the motel's 87 units will be rehabilitated for housing purposes and they will become part of the City's homelessness portfolio.

I've championed important and evidence-based strategies to address homelessness including:

- Funding for more permanent supportive housing units with wraparound services
- Funding for integrated mental health response, substance use disorder treatment, case management, permanent supportive housing and employment training;

- Purchase of a domestic violence shelter and funding for wrap around services for survivors of domestic violence;
- Additional funding for the Workforce First program run by The Other Ones Foundation that trains and employs people experiencing homelessness to clean parks (a program I co-sponsored);
- Additional funding for the Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST) to expand the program beyond downtown; and
- Funding for additional Community Health Paramedics, whose responsibilities will include medical care and other resources for individuals experiencing homelessness.

It is important to remember that the City alone cannot tackle this issue; it requires partnerships at all levels of government and private entities as well. Right now, the application process for vacant existing housing units can prevent many individuals from being approved. In my second term I intend to continue working with realtors and landlords to work around these obstacles and get individuals into existing housing units. Under this possibility, the City and its service partners would stabilize individuals, guarantee their rent, and provide wrap around services. Landlords would agree to rent units to those individuals, and we could more quickly house folks in existing vacant units. This is a cost effective strategy that, in partnership with constructing new units, can allow us to rapidly house more individuals.

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?

In 2018, I led on the police contract reforms that shepherded the creation of the Office of Police Oversight, and in the most recent budget, I successfully increased funding for the Office of Police Oversight and for the Equity Office. Following several gut-wrenching conversations with advocates and survivors of sexual assault, I saw clearly that our sexual assault response system was not delivering healing and justice to survivors. Sexual assault disproportionately impacts women and people of color and 99% of reported cases in Austin remain unresolved. I authored a resolution initiating a comprehensive evaluation of our system in order to bring forward systemic change and ensure that survivors receive the prioritization and justice they deserve. In my second term I will focus on implementing the recommendations that we receive and build on my earlier work increased staffing and resources for victims services and improving our DNA-test processing system.

In June, I co-sponsored several resolutions that aim to improve the racial outcomes we are seeing in Austin's justice system. Some of the specifics steps we took through those resolutions include: developing a system to identify and address at-risk officers who demonstrate dangerous behavior; improving the cadet academy and requiring more extensive ongoing training, including implicit bias training, cultural competency training, and more; identifying opportunities in the meet and confer contract to achieve greater accountability for officers; changing the APD General Orders to restrict use of force on individuals exercising their First

Amendment rights and on the general citizenry; and setting goals for zero racial disparities in areas like traffic stops, use of force incidents, citations, and arrests. I also am working on ways to increase language access (such as interpretation and translation) so that Austinites who speak other languages can communicate with officers and city officials. Improving their communication with English speaking personnel will better ensure they are treated with fairness, respect, and earnestness. These resolutions will be implemented over the next several months and require much vigilance and oversight.

In our recent budget, we reinvested \$20 million in city fity funds from the cadet classes into staffing and programs outside of APD, including new ambulances, mental health response, community health paramedics serving the homeless, domestic violence shelters, substance use, and violence prevention programs that will save lives and make our community safer for all. We also identified \$130 million in functions to be considered for decoupling and reimagining over the next 6-12 months. The city manager has convened a reimagining task force to assist with that review. We anticipate a mid-year budget amendment process and the public safety committee is meeting bi-weekly in advance of that process.