

Vanessa Fuentes - Candidate for Austin City Council District 2

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?

Austin must take immediate action on climate change and I will do everything in my power as council member to work to ensure that we address this climate crisis. Climate change has had a severe impact on Southeast Austin, the community I live in and seek to represent. Our community has been hit by two recent catastrophic floods, killing our community members, damaging hundreds of homes, and displacing residents. We are bearing the brunt of extreme weather swings. Our region as a whole has seen longer periods of extreme drought and then heavy rains which overwhelms our drainage infrastructure.

I support the ongoing effort to update the Climate Equity Plan which would move up the deadline by which our city is planning to end greenhouse emissions and carbon emissions in this city to 2040, while keeping equity centered in the conversation. I also support efforts to update building codes so that new construction reached net-zero carbon emissions. I want the city to invest in low-cost charging stations, reduce highway tolls for these vehicles, create incentives to purchase or rent them and encourage private and public transit to purchase 100% electric vehicles for their fleets.

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

Our low-income and communities of color are bearing the brunt of the impact of COVID-19. When the pandemic hit, CommUnityCare clinics east of I-35 were shut down. What message does that send to my community? I started organizing to find out why this happened and helped pressure local elected officials to re-open these facilities. I also joined with other community members to host the first PPE giveaway in District 2, months after the pandemic hit us. I have since helped organize three PPE distributions in Dove Springs and Del Valle.

I believe that my background in public health would have helped recognize the disparities in the impact of COVID-19 at an earlier time and proactively stepped up to ensure that communities of color received more than their share of support. It took our elected officials too long to recognize these disparities. From ensuring that press conferences were held in Spanish as quickly as possible, to distributing resources, to ensuring that testing sites were accessible in location and hours of operations. Moving forward we need a proactive vaccination strategy that centers our essential workers and vulnerable populations.

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

The City of Austin has been left to solve a problem which would be more easily solved with partnerships within our region, state, and federal government. The sad truth is that our Governor and President have politicized the unhoused in the City of Austin, working to score political points instead of working with us to solve the problem.

The City of Austin is currently facing one of the most severe affordable housing crises in history. Not surprisingly, those living in poverty are the most significantly affected. The supply of low-cost housing has shrunk, rents have continued to rise, all while lower-income Austinites have experienced slow or stagnant wage growth. Too many Austinites spend at least half of their income toward housing, putting them at risk of housing instability and homelessness. The solution to homelessness is straightforward: housing. By connecting people experiencing homelessness to housing and services, they have a platform from which they can address other areas that may have contributed to their homelessness — such as employment, health, and substance abuse.

We need to dedicate more funding to permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing. Permanent supportive housing pairs long-term rental assistance with supportive services. It is targeted to individuals and families with chronic illnesses, disabilities, mental health issues, or substance use disorders who have experienced long-term or repeated homelessness. Rapid re-housing provides short-term rental assistance and services. The goals are to help people obtain housing quickly, increase self-sufficiency, and stay housed.

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?

Like many Austinites, I joined the protests this summer in response to the brutal death of George Floyd and Southeast Austinite Mike Ramos. There is no good justification for shooting non-lethal projectiles at people's heads. This practice has to end. I grieve for Justin Howell and Levi Ayala, from Del Valle. I remember seeing pictures of a pregnant woman named Saraneka Martin after she was shot by a projectile that hit her stomach.

The militarization of our city's police departments was on full display at these protests. I support recent actions taken by council and believe we have to continue this effort to reimagine our community's policing effort.