

University Democrats - Questions for City Council Candidates

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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?

The climate crisis is an existential threat that demands our immediate attention. Even as we face other mounting challenges, we must take urgent action to combat climate change and build resilience in our own community.

Ten years ago, while I was active in U Dems as a first-generation college student, I wrote to the Austin City Council for the first time to demand that they shut down the Fayette Coal Power Plant and make real investments in renewable energy. First as a student, then as an organizer and policy advisor, I have passionately advocated for more sustainable environmental, energy, mobility, and land use policies and investments. I have advocated for environmental justice for many years and over that time, my convictions have only intensified. I remain committed to taking urgent action to fight climate change and build resilience in our most vulnerable communities. As a candidate, I was proud to sign the #NoFossilFuelMoney Pledge.

Having grown up in Dove Springs, a neighborhood in Southeast Austin that has experienced deadly flooding, I have seen firsthand the devastating effects that infrastructure neglect can have on a community. And we know that communities of color are going to continue to bear the brunt of natural disasters and the most devastating effects of climate change.

Longer droughts threaten our water supply. More intense storms and flooding threaten our communities. We cannot afford the cost to lives and livelihoods that failing to build a climate-resilient community would impose, especially on working families and communities of color. I am deeply committed to sustainability and investments in community resilience. While progress has been made, there is much more that we need to do to protect our community from climate change.

We need a true resilience strategy that addresses all aspects of our climate crisis and ensures we approach them comprehensively, rather than in silos. As we rise from this pandemic, I believe we can emerge with renewed resolve in our fight for equity. Rather than hoping for things to simply

return to normal, I believe we can come together to seek a new and better normal that addresses the long-standing disparities in our community. This is why I support the City's efforts to instate a Chief Resilience Officer, who can work in partnership with our community to craft a strategic resilience plan and guide City policies and investments to help build a better and more sustainable community.

The issues of climate change and racial justice are inextricably linked. Austin has a challenging history of environmental racism and inequity. For decades, the city neglected East and Southeast Austin's infrastructure needs, while simultaneously directing industrial development here. Today, District 2 - a community that is home to many immigrant and working families of color with low incomes - still faces significant infrastructure issues, and large swaths of the district remain zoned for industrial uses - including sites with hazardous materials.

To reckon with Austin's history, we must confront these decisions directly. We must examine our infrastructure investments - in flood mitigation, parkland, multi-modal infrastructure, and more - through an equity lens, and push for transitioning and remediating former industrial sites to healthier uses that better serve our communities and allow us to heal.

While working at City Hall, one of my proudest accomplishments was working with the community to craft the resolution that directed the City of Austin to create the Red Bluff "La Loma" Wildlife Preserve (a 57-acre tract of land in the Govalle neighborhood), fund connectivity improvements on the La Loma Trail, and conduct a community-driven planning process to preserve the city-owned Red Bluff Tract for public use. In collaboration with community advocates, we directed the remediation of the toxic illegal dumping site and ensured that this beautiful landscape could be preserved as parkland and enjoyed by the families of East Austin, who have historically been subjected to environmental racism and a lack of investment in parks and open space. This was a deeply healing and transformative process and it will continue to inform my approach as I continue to advocate for environmental justice and equity.

I unequivocally support the Green New Deal as a clear and comprehensive vision of how we can build truly resilient, equitable, and inclusive communities. It is a complete reimagining of the way we approach policy and deliver services, to restructure our production and consumption patterns around sustainability, to invest in sustainable infrastructure and renewable resources, to build our economy upon a green foundation - and to do so in a way in which all members of our community can participate, contribute, and benefit.

Locally, that means a comprehensive approach to energy efficiency, renewable resources, sustainable building patterns, and a just transition to green jobs with living wages and worker protections. We must invest in efficient building and repair programs that allow our residents to lower their energy consumption. We must build a robust transit network that allows our residents to access their communities without need of a single-occupancy vehicle. We must reform our land use patterns to offer residents more diverse and affordable housing opportunities within Austin, rather than pushing them out to the sprawling fringes of Central Texas. We must shift our energy generation and provide forward-looking infrastructure to better meet our community-wide net-zero goals. We must examine all of our programs and investments as a City through an equity lens to ensure we are serving all members of our community. And we must hire departmental leadership who understands the various ways all of these different policy areas collide at the intersection of resiliency.

Austin is fortunate to have a vibrant advocacy community that has pushed the city to adopt bold sustainability goals for the city through the Austin Energy Resource, Generation and Climate Protection Plan. I fully support implementing our Generation Plan and will collaborate closely with the community to identify opportunities to reduce our carbon footprint and accelerate our efforts to move toward a more sustainable and renewable future, including supporting increasing our investments in renewable energy generation, pushing to electrify our city fleet, and working toward our zero-waste goals.

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?

As we overcome this crisis, we cannot return to business as usual. We must resolve to build a new and better normal that serves and supports justice, equity, and opportunity in our community.

As Republicans at the national and state level continue to abdicate their responsibility to our working families, it becomes even more critical for us to do all we can through our local government to take action to protect our community and navigate our own recovery.

The pandemic has laid bare some of the worst disparities in our region. “Pre-existing conditions” like housing instability, food insecurity, and lack of access to quality healthcare fostered the environment that allowed the pandemic to wreak havoc in our community, especially in District 2 where many of our neighbors serve as frontline workers and risk exposure to the virus with

little choice, protection, or compensation. While these workers and their families are being called essential, they are not being given the essential protections they need or deserve. We must address these injustices and build real community resilience to prepare for future pandemics, economic downturns, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change. In addition to addressing the most immediate public health challenges and the already very present threat of climate change - three of my top priority issues are:

1. Access to Safe, Healthy, and Affordable Housing. As our City continues to grow and the cost of living rises, our focus is on preserving and creating more affordable housing opportunities.
2. Access to Frequent, Reliable, and Affordable Public Transit. After housing and childcare, transportation is the next highest expense for families. Access to reliable public transportation that provides access to schools, employment centers, grocery stores, and health and childcare services is a matter of social justice.
3. Access to Quality Education and Economic Opportunity. As we take on the housing and transportation crisis, we must also work to provide more support and opportunities for working families in our community including access to higher education, quality childcare, digital technology, career training programs, and job opportunities with living wages, good benefits, and worker protections.

Dove Springs, the neighborhood in Southeast Austin I grew up in and still live in today, is an immigrant, working class community where many families struggle to access and maintain affordable housing. I believe that housing is a human right and I am committed to furthering fair housing goals and practices to ensure that every individual and family in our community has access to quality, affordable housing throughout the City.

Our housing shortage is a major factor that drives displacement and gentrification. That's why I support making improvements to our land development code to encourage a greater diversity of housing supply, including workforce housing, in areas along major corridors and activity centers. I support the goal of implementing policy that helps create "all types of homes for all kinds of people in all parts of town." And I will continue my support for large, bold investments in affordable housing and for utilizing publicly-owned land to create more affordable housing.

As a Council Member, I would be committed to continuing to fight for real affordability, reliable transit, and access to economic opportunity in our community, including by:

- Adopting a new Land Development Code that provides for a diversity of housing types, especially along our major corridors and in our activity centers;

- Investing city resources in creating affordable housing in all parts of town;
- Strategically utilizing publicly-owned land to create more affordable housing in a diversity of housing types;
- Supporting Project Connect and, if approved, ensuring that we deliver on its promises for frequent, reliable, and accessible transit;
- Building out a robust multi-modal network of sidewalks, safe routes to schools, protected bike lanes, urban trails, and other pedestrian and bike-friendly infrastructure;
- Creating a city-funded and city-issued housing voucher system, as well as a program that incentivizes property managers to accept these vouchers, including through low- or no-interest property repair loans and lease signing bonuses;
- Ensuring robust tenant protections in all projects receiving city assistance, incentives, or bonuses, including source-of-income protections, just-cause eviction protections, notice-before-entry provisions, and anti-retaliation measures, among others;
- Funding eviction counseling and tenant advocacy programs;
- Codifying tenant rights, including the right to organize and the right to resolve rent, fees, or other lease-related charges prior to eviction;
- Expanding the city's pilot "Right to Return / Right to Remain" policy, which grants affordable housing unit priority to households with generational ties to East Austin;
- Acquiring existing multi-family and mobile home park properties to create community land trusts, particularly in areas susceptible to gentrification;
- Expanding assistance programs for emergency mortgage relief, no-interest home repair loans, and free weatherization programs offered through Austin Energy;
- Providing affordable childcare services by creating and stabilizing high-quality daycare centers that accept childcare subsidies, expanding high-quality Pre-K education, and funding new childcare subsidies to address our community's waitlist;
- Aligning our zoning code with the City of Austin's Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice;
- Incentivizing the creation of middle-skill jobs to spur our community's economic growth and create opportunities for Austinites to remain and thrive in Austin so no one gets left behind as Austin prospers;
- Workplace development in our public schools through the expansion of vocational training and apprenticeships, including projects that involve City infrastructure or utilize City bond funds and I will work to create more opportunities for graduating students who may not be seeking a college education;
- Working with local employers to collaborate on a housing fund to support the creation and preservation of rental workforce housing, incentivizing the production of living wage jobs;

- Implementing the full recommendations put forth in the Austin Metro Area Master Community Workforce Plan (MCWP), especially how it outlines a strategy for how our community can work residents and employers to match one another's needs while also creating a pipeline for Austinites in disadvantaged communities to good-paying jobs;
- Supporting small businesses and advancing opportunities to grow small businesses through community lending, as well as the creation of small business incubators on city-owned land that can serve as spaces where historically marginalized entrepreneurs can test and grow their businesses in a stable environment with technical assistance from the City of Austin and other partners; and
- Continuing to be supportive of the advancement of our City's paid sick leave policy and working to expand other essential worker protections.

I have called for adopting robust protections for working families, including:

- Guaranteeing emergency paid sick leave for part-time, temporary, tipped, and self-employed workers who are typically excluded from existing programs;
- Stabilizing our childcare centers, which are a critical resource for working families;
- Adopting stronger enforcement mechanisms to ensure employers are adhering to public health rules; and
- Educating workers on the city's rules and on their rights under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and any future legislation that expands protections for households affected by COVID-19.

Furthermore, I strongly support and would work to expand the many relief initiatives Council has taken on, including:

- Establishing the RISE program which, through Mayor Pro Tem Garza's leadership, has served many families in District 2 that may not have qualified for other assistance;
- Adopting robust tenant protections like eviction moratoriums, utility assistance, and housing assistance;
- Crafting, with Council Member Casar's leadership, a comprehensive strategy to protect high-risk workers through telework options, increased unemployment insurance access, assistance funds for individuals denied access to existing social services, and a high-risk worker navigation center;
- Providing direct assistance for medical and household expenses; and
- Funding caregiver meals through Del Valle ISD.

Our working families deserve better than being put in a position to choose between financial stability and their loved ones' health. We can, and must, allow working families to choose what

is best for them and their family's health by adopting strong policies that expand our assistance programs, provide critical services, and educate and equip the public to take action to combat this threat.

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

One of the most important aspects of ending homelessness in our community is prevention – making investments and implementing policy that addresses the root causes of homelessness. Housing is a human right and our community must work in unison to remove the barriers that prevent people from accessing fair, decent, safe, stable, and affordable housing.

I support Housing First policies, which show that when our unhoused neighbors can access housing quickly and with fewer restrictions, they are more likely to stay housed. I support the recommendations put forth in the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) report, “Recommendations for the Redesign of Emergency Shelters in Austin,” which describe recommendations to reform our shelter system to become more trauma-informed and housing-focused. Austin's research shows that most people who are unhoused in our community have brief episodes of homelessness, but that some program rules and requirements create longer periods of homelessness and do not necessarily address an individual's housing barriers. Based on the data, I support low-barrier entry requirements for shelters and programs and I support NAEH and Org Code's diversion training methods which helps us prioritize our shelter resources for those in greatest need.

The 2020 Point-In-Time Count revealed that 1,574 people are living unsheltered and 932 people who are living in a shelter at any one time in Austin. And we know that there are thousands more in our community who are experiencing homelessness while they live in their vehicles, the far reaches of our community's greenbelts, or are doubled-up in insecure housing situations. We also know from the data that 63% of people experiencing homelessness in Austin became homeless for the first time in Austin.

We are making strides for certain populations experiencing homelessness. With LifeWorks' Youth Demonstration Grant, youth homelessness has dropped significantly. The number of veterans experiencing homelessness was reduced by 40% last year due to the award-winning Ending Veteran's Homelessness Initiative.

But we need to recognize that homelessness in our community is disproportionately experienced by people of color, especially Black Austinites. And that addressing the longstanding inequities in our community, including disparities in services and opportunity for communities of color, is integral to truly taking on this challenge.

I believe that addressing community homelessness requires the community and I am deeply appreciative of the collaboration between the City, ECHO, the Austin Apartment Association, and many other providers to work with property owners to relax screening requirements to accept rental applications for veterans experiencing homelessness during the Ending Veteran's Homelessness Initiative. Coupled with the commitment from social service agencies to provide continued wraparound services to individuals after they are housed, I think this initiative is a great example of how different stakeholders can collaborate and work to create a better system for our unhoused neighbors.

The ECHO and City of Austin's COVID-19 Homelessness Response Plan presents a valuable opportunity for Austin to leverage and optimize the influx of new (and more flexible) HUD dollars to address racial disparities in our homelessness community, pilot new processes to improve our community's response to homelessness, and permanently end individuals' homelessness for both those who are unsheltered and those currently residing in the City's protective lodges and isolation-facility.

I support deeper and more significant City investment in Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Rehousing, and homelessness prevention services, such as low-barrier rental assistance or direct cash assistance for costs such as medical needs, to keep folks housed and prevent displacement that can lead to homelessness. And I support the City's investment in hotels, motels, or other residential structures to ensure that high-risk individuals experiencing homelessness and survivors of family violence have a place to stay and do not have to choose between staying in an unsafe situation or experiencing homelessness.

This year, the City contracted with nationally renowned consultants to see how we could maximize our investments in our homelessness response system. Their report, "Investing for Results: Priorities and Recommendations for a Systems Approach to End Homelessness" was released on July 23, 2020, and presented to Council on August 4,

2020. The report, produced by Barb Poppe and associates, offers recommendations and strategies to help ensure that “public and private investments into programs and initiatives to address homelessness in Austin have the maximum impact.” The report describes ways in which we can reduce inflow into the system (prevention and diversion), address crises, and stabilize people once they are in housing.

We know what works in our community. Low-barrier shelters, an abundance of available and safe housing, and strong wraparound social services to keep people housed. The City’s role in this system is to expand the availability of affordable rental homes. An abundant supply of affordable, low-barrier rental housing helps reduce the likelihood of homelessness in the first place and it also means that when a person experiences homelessness: it can be brief and non-recurring.

And throughout all of this – expanding our system, strengthening programs, making funding decisions – it is imperative to center the voices of people with lived experience and use a racial equity lens in our planning processes and investments so we can address the deep and glaring racial disparities in our homelessness response system.

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?

I have publicly and vocally supported reallocating funding from the Austin Police Department to serve other community needs in ways that better advance the safety of our community, such as investments in our housing and public health services and infrastructure. Our community has faced decades of institutional neglect, which has resulted in deep injustices and disparities as it relates to basic services and infrastructure like housing, public transportation, food security, and access to healthcare and education. But there are few places, if any, where those injustices are more visceral and stark than in instances of police violence directed at our community.

I have called for far-reaching structural change to the Austin Police Department and our public safety institutions, including efforts to balance our investment toward services that can yield better outcomes for all of our residents and better align with our community’s values. Currently, police officers are asked to respond to a wide range of calls for assistance and to perform functions for which they do not have adequate training. Our community would be

better served by having other trained professionals respond to non-emergency calls in instances in which their skill sets are more appropriate.

A recent Austin Office of Police Oversight report showed that in 2018, the majority of Austin's officer-involved shootings occurred in District 2, and the victims were primarily Latino men who look like me. For that reason and many more, our commitment to ending police violence is not just theoretical, it is deeply personal. We launched our campaign to do all we can to better the lives of working families, to ensure our community has a voice when decisions that impact our lives are made, and to help create an Austin for all - where every single family has the opportunity to pursue their dreams and achieve their full potential. We need to bring an end to police violence to accomplish those goals.

This mistrust and fear between the Black community and APD comes from a very real place and it's rooted in a racist system. I myself have experienced racial profiling and have been arrested for documenting excessive use of force (though not in Austin). Those charges were dropped for what the prosecutor called "lack of evidence", but I recognize that if I were Black I may not have even had the opportunity to walk away from the situation, yet alone have access to due process to fight the case.

In order to make the kind of changes that our institutions meant to uphold justice require, we need to build public trust. In order to build public trust, we need to have real measures of accountability. And in order to have real accountability we need to make sure that the voices of our most impacted communities are included. That all needs to be underpinned by strong civilian oversight and public safety leaders who actually understand that their role is to work in partnership with the community for progress and accountability.

I do not have confidence that our current police leadership will hold our police force accountable, which is one of the reasons why I have called for the resignation of Austin Police Chief Brian Manley.

As a Council Member, I would commit to:

- Pushing both for revising our police contract to provide leadership with stronger disciplinary powers as well as for appointing leaders who share our values and are willing to use these disciplinary tools to deliver accountable and responsible public safety services;

- Require that the City of Austin participate in a national database of problematic officers, both to inform our own hiring decisions but also to inform those of other jurisdictions. I also recognize that if we are to fully contribute to such a database, the city must be committed to accurately and consistently documenting any problematic behavior that an Austin officer exhibits.
- Pushing for public safety leaders who will document problematic behavior - both to deliver accountability locally, but also so that these records are available to departments across the nation to consider in their hiring processes;
- Requiring rigorous screening as it is an important strategy for ensuring that the city is making appropriate hiring, retention, and promotion decisions. Having the right leadership in place is key to ensuring that our screening processes are working as intended;
- Implementing implicit bias, cultural competency, and de-escalation trainings. I believe that these trainings are important and necessary components of an overall strategy to re-imagine the way we provide public health and safety services in our cities. While Austin has implemented these types of trainings, we have nonetheless heard from former cadets who have described problematic attitudes in the police academy and received third-party reports listing serious issues with the police department's internal culture;
- Calling for the termination of officers who engage in excessive force; and
- Developing an early warning system for high-risk officers who are likely to engage in excessive force or unjust police tactics. This type of system can help us remove officers who are unfit to serve our community before preventable tragedies occur.

Ultimately, we have continued to see deep disparities in policing outcomes - and I believe we will continue to see such disparities until we restructure the way our public safety services are managed and institute training programs supported by a healthier departmental culture. I've worked on past efforts to change the police contract to include improvements to transparency on reprimands. I also believe that these improvements, however meaningful, have not gone far enough - and look forward to pressing for reforms that can ensure a more transparent and accountable police force.

For years, the city deployed police instead of public health officials - providing tickets instead of treatment - as its default response to calls involving people experiencing homelessness. Rather than providing the support and stability needed to better address the root causes of homelessness, the city adopted laws that criminalized it and pushed people farther out to the

margins of our society.

Criminalizing those in need of assistance, care, and treatment is cruel and does not serve our community or make us any safer. As we continue to find solutions that re-imagine public safety this is an area we must prioritize. We need well-equipped, trained professionals responding to calls for assistance that involve individuals suffering from mental health crises or struggling with substance abuse. We need to allocate significant resources into programs that will divert individuals away from the criminal justice and immigration detention systems and connect them with the services they truly need.

In this recent budget, I supported investments in low-barrier programs that promote wellness and safety in our community, including harm reduction measures for those who engage in substance use, family violence prevention and shelter needs, shelter and housing for those experiencing homelessness, and programs that build pathways out of poverty.

I also believe the City should fully invest in Integral Care's EMCOT, MCOT, and the Crisis Call Diversion program, which diverts mental health calls received by 9-1-1 to qualified mental health professionals who can provide a mental health first response for individuals in the midst of mental crisis. This type of investment would ensure that qualified mental health professionals could assist individuals in crisis 24/7 in most situations without a police officer.

Lastly, I believe that as a community we must invest in preventive programs and resources to ensure that we break the cycle of violence. One example of such an investment is in the realm of gun violence prevention. My community in District 2 is disproportionately impacted by gun violence and I have loved ones whose lives have been forever changed by community violence and gun violence in schools. I am deeply passionate about addressing gun violence for what it truly is: a public health crisis.

I supported the creation of the City of Austin Task Force on Gun Violence and I wholeheartedly endorse the recommendations put forth by the Task Force, especially the newly established Office of Violence Prevention which I view as a critical component of how we re-imagine public safety and a better approach to prevent gun violence in Austin. I support the remaining recommendations of the City of Austin Task Force on Gun Violence, including evidence-based violence prevention and intervention strategies, hospital-based violence intervention programs, investments in cognitive behavioral therapy, and the expansion of our social safety net to

include outreach workers and social workers in communities that have sustained trauma and violence.

I fully support a public health-oriented approach to public safety and I supported funding initiatives meant to prevent violence, reduce harm, and promote community wellness. I have a strong record of work in this area, and I look forward to pushing for continued progress going forward.

(Please find our statement on the ongoing protest for Justice that we published in June here - <https://www.davidford2.com/statement-ongoing-protests>)

Thank you for the consideration and for everything y'all are doing to get people registered and turn out the vote. As a former UDem, I would be honored to have your support!