

2018 Austin City Council Candidates from District 9: Responses to Affordable Housing Questionnaire

1. The Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint calls for “new funding, new regulations, new programs, new and deeper partnerships and collaborations with non-profit organizations, legislative changes, land development code changes, and participation from the private sector” in order to meet the growing need. What ideas do you envision to reach significant progress with the goals identified in the Blueprint?

Katherine (Kathie) Tovo

Austin has a responsibility to provide for all of our residents, especially those who are finding it more difficult to afford to live here. Unlike many of our peer cities in other states, however, Austin has only limited options when it comes to affordable housing policy due to restrictions that the state has imposed. That is why it is so important that we elect progressive local leaders who have the experience needed to advance significant housing policies on the local level.

My record demonstrates that I have been a strong advocate for affordable housing who brings the depth of experience we need to move us forward despite barriers put up by the state.

I support and voted for the Strategic Housing Blueprint, which outlines many different implementation strategies, including pursuing bond elections, providing additional General Fund appropriations, maximizing use of public property, developing a strike fund, utilizing Planned Unit Developments (PUDs), leveraging low-income housing tax credits, and supporting housing cooperatives.

I have led on or otherwise strongly supported initiatives recommended by the Blueprint, the Task Force on Institutional Racism, or other planning efforts. These include (among others):

- Pursuing bond elections by voting to place a \$250 million affordable housing bond on the ballot for voter approval this year.
- Supporting every previous affordable housing bond proposition.
- After the failure of one affordable bond proposition, leading Council to allocate approximately \$10 million for affordable housing in a mid-year budget amendment that enabled Austin affordable housing developments to continue forward with city support.
- Leading Council in expanding the amount of money transferred to the Housing Trust Fund to create and preserve affordable housing, which was fully funded for the first time in the FY19 budget.
- Maximizing use of public property by directing the City Manager to identify underutilized City property that we can develop for affordable housing.
- Developing a strike fund to purchase naturally occurring affordable rental housing.
- Supporting the Clarksville Community Development Corporation and the South Central Community Development Corporations in expanding their work.
- Utilizing Planned Unit Developments by voting to approve PUD projects, such as the Grove PUD, which required the developers to provide affordable housing.

(see next page)

<p>Katherine Kathie Tovo (cd)</p>	<p>(cont)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for changes to density bonus programs to require more onsite housing rather than fees in lieu. • Leveraging low-income housing tax credits by consistently supporting Council- adopted letters of support for tax credit projects in Austin. • Supporting housing cooperatives by creating financial mechanisms to help form affordable residential cooperatives. • Directing the City Manager to explore creating a “right to return” policy for residents at risk of displacement. • Directing the City Manager to explore ways to create opportunities for tenants in repeat offender properties to purchase and renovate their residences. <p>In addition to continuing to oversee implementation of these efforts and others, I am also interested in continue the conversation about ways to expand our affordable housing bonus program so that we can secure affordable housing units as we realize the Imagine Austin vision of adding density on our corridors and in our centers, as well as strengthening our fee in lieu policies.</p> <p>If re-elected, I look forward to continuing to work on creative and innovative affordable housing strategies that can help implement our Strategic Housing Blueprint and provide homes for families of all means and backgrounds.</p>
<p>Danielle Skidmore</p>	<p>We need to support the Peoples Plan. The Peoples Plan calls for the establishment of Low-income housing trust fund and appropriations. The trust fund will construct or subsidize housing for low-income families. It also calls for using public land to construct low-income housing. The Plan recommends a Right to Stay and Right to Return Program for East Austin residents. The Plan would use Neighborhood Conservation Combined Districts and Historic Districts to help conserve and preserve our neighborhoods and prevent gentrification and displacement. I support preserving and expanding low- income and moderate housing through rehabilitation, new construction, tax exemptions, community Land Trust and expanded opportunities for home ownership. I support preserving public housing, creating cooperative housing and the construction of housing on public land by non-profit groups. Construction of Energy Efficient homes.</p>

Linda O'Neal

We need to protect renters from steep unexpected rent increases. Affordability is a nation-wide issue. Austin is not the only city pushing residents out. Austin, and other cities, are promoting density and encouraging developers to build affordable housing. With little oversight and lack of transparency, there is a high potential for corruption. A special on PBS Poverty, Politics, and Profit: Frontline, outlines how pervasive this problem is. What Austin offers to developers who build affordable housing into their units is an extra floor. Often building the extra floor is too expensive and developers opt to pay the fine. Under this current program, only 1,450 units of affordable housing will be built over the next decade. If we want to meet the needs of the city, that number needs to be around 60,000 (Austin Monitor, 2018). We need to revisit Lease-to-Purchase programs, but we need to do so carefully, fiscally, and with complete transparency. During the nineties, Austin had a lease-to-purchase program called SCIP (Scattered Cooperative Infill Program). Pamela Franklin was the only resident who qualified for the program over the fifteen year period. When she tried to purchase her home, the city denied that the program had ever existed. When the city was proven wrong, they still tried to deny her the purchase of her home over a technicality. Pamela Franklin had her day in court and won. (Austin American Statesman, 2014). Cleveland has the largest lease-to-purchase network and the program seems to be working. Over 80 percent of those who participated in the program have transitioned into homeownership. This is how it works. The Cleveland Housing Network (CHN) uses Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) to attract equity investors who, in exchange for the 15-year tax credits, help CHN to buy single-family rental properties. CHN then offers these homes for rent at an affordable price. At the end of the 15-years, renters who have successfully made it through the program are then able to purchase the home below the market value, usually for less than \$20,000. The organization is able to keep the home purchase price low because the LIHTC credits allow it to buy the home without going into significant debt. Another successful program is Rent-to-Buy Program in the U.K. The program is designed to give renters affordable rent, save for a deposit, and then either buy the new home or a different home at a later date. Non-profits carry the bulk of the low-cost rental housing and bid for a share of government funded low-cost loans to build 10,000 new homes within two years. This program is aimed at the middle class. Single people earning up to \$50,000 or couples earning up \$100,000 are eligible to participate in a program that will offer fixed rents at 20 percent below the market value. At the end of the fifteen year program, the tenant can refused to buy or use the equity to buy at another property. (Center for American Progress). Again, while I think that lease-to-purchase have some major positives, the city and the citizens must be diligent and clear, there has to be full transparency.

2. How do you suggest we enable the market to build more attainable housing for families and individuals currently priced out of our market, but earning more than 80% MFI?

Katherine (Kathie) Tovo

I believe that the City needs to consider ways to “close the gap” in our housing needs by providing for residents who are not eligible for many of our affordable housing programs but are nevertheless being displaced.

One of the key ways I have sought to meet this need so far is by working to protect our naturally occurring affordable housing stock from being demolished and redeveloped as much more expensive units. I also believe that we should look to the Strategic Housing Blueprint for potential strategies that could help create affordable housing for families earning more than 80% of the median family income (MFI), including exploring the recommendation that the city expand the S.M. A.R.T. Housing Program to include higher incomes and consider funding for strategies aimed at this housing need. I would also like to engage the conversation of how we can manage our growth on our corridors and in our centers in such a way as to provide market-rate housing that meets the needs of residents at this income level.

I believe that these strategies are worth exploring further and look forward to engaging with our affordable housing advocates on strategies for providing housing that is affordable for families between 80% and 120% of MFI.

Danielle Skidmore

While I support direct interventions such as the Prop A (Affordable housing bonds) to help improve housing access for working class families, the city does not have the financial resources to meet the immense need. We must find room for market rate housing of all types throughout the city. This does not automatically mean more impervious cover or larger buildings, but a willingness to consider more housing options.

Where practical, large lots (such as corner lots) can also support more housing units for more families. Perhaps this could involve smaller minimum lot sizes, or more limited setbacks to achieve a goal of a greater diversity of housing options. The key is to work with the community to find solutions together. We can absolutely build more housing units at a neighborhood scale that enhances the community.

We, as a city, also need to build more multi-family housing along and near or core transportation corridors. Given our expensive land costs throughout Austin, a key to providing more housing that works for the middle-class is to provide more types of homes that distribute this land cost more efficiently. We also need to provide options to add density to single-family housing lots, such as allowing ADUs (accessory dwelling units) in all neighborhoods—as previously voted against by the incumbent in District 9. This will increase homeowners’ ability to shoulder increasing property taxes through supplemental rental income, while expanding rental inventory.

Linda O'Neal	I think the city needs to buy up more land so that we can use that land for affordable housing. McKalla Place was city land with several proposals, but the city decided that subsidizing a multi-million dollar soccer deal was more important. We cannot rely on the market to produce affordable housing because that simply does not make ANY sense. The market cares about profit and affordable housing is not affordable, unless we are using federal housing credits to help with the costs. But if the city does that, it is the responsibility of the city to make sure that government money is not being pocketed by developers, realtors, etc.
3. How would you encourage large employers and private sector partners in Austin to contribute to the provision of affordable housing for their workers and the industries serving them?	
Katherine (Kathie) Tovo	<p>I believe that the private sector, especially employers, are an important part of our overall housing strategy, as laid out in the Strategic Housing Blueprint.</p> <p>One of the key strategies that our Strategic Housing Blueprint identifies for helping to solve our affordable housing challenges is by providing incentives to support higher wages that can improve a resident's ability to afford to live in Austin. During my time as a Council Member, I led the way on this type of initiative, raising the standard on wage and benefits requirements for companies receiving City incentives. We should also consider more direct ways to encourage or require more affordable housing provisions among those companies who apply for city incentives.</p> <p>In addition to this, I look forward to continuing the conversation over other innovative solutions that could be taken in partnership with the private sector, such as a private-sector fund that can help us finance preserving and constructing workforce housing, as is used successfully in other cities. I have been – and will continue to be – supportive of this strategy so far and will continue to be supportive going forward.</p>
Danielle Skidmore	<p>Large employers and private sector partners and their employees can contribute to providing additional affordable housing for our community through direct philanthropy to Austin's ecosystem of affordable housing non-profits.</p> <p>As Austin grows and as businesses build new facilities, we must leverage all available bonus tools to incentivize developments which also provide community benefits of affordable housing inventory. Transportation is a major component of affordability, and employers can improve their workers quality of life by locating facilities in areas well served by public transportation and in areas identified in Imagine Austin as activity centers.</p>
Linda O'Neal	Oracle is providing cheap housing for their new employees, many of who are not from Austin. I don't support this. This model is great if you work at Oracle, but its hurts long time Austin residents. I would support this if Oracle and other large employers offered these subsidized rents to non-salaried employees who make less than \$50,000 a year.

<p>4.What city policies and roles can the city play to prevent formal and informal evictions among low income tenants?</p>	
<p>Katherine (Kathie) Tovo</p>	<p>I believe that the City has a responsibility to take strong action to protect our residents against unfair and unjust evictions. As a Council Member, I have acted on my values and led the way on a number of key tenant rights policies – some of which are still in progress – that are consistent with our Strategic Housing Blueprint and protect our residents from eviction, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing “good cause” eviction protections to residents who live in rent-controlled units and developments that participate in City incentive programs. • Establishing a program to educate renters about their rights and provide support and representation to them during eviction proceedings. • Ensuring tenant protections in private activity bond developments that require City approval. • Engaging with students at the University of Texas to create a tenants’ rights and education awareness campaign. • Requiring any properties registered in the City’s “Repeat Offender Program” for a history of code violations to adopt tenant protections. • Establishing an “emergency tenant displacement response plan” to address the needs of tenants who are displaced from their home for safety reasons. • Prohibiting discrimination based on an individual’s source of income. <p>Going forward, I will continue to review best practices around the country and to bring them forward for Council consideration as appropriate to ensure that the City strengthens and expands tenant protections.</p>
<p>Danielle Skidmore</p>	<p>We can protect vulnerable tenants by strengthening public information campaigns run through BASTA to notify residents of tenants’ rights. Housing access not only means bringing new people into new housing units, but helping current tenants navigate and exercise their rights. The city’s EE/FHO is the primary recourse for people who have been subjected to housing discrimination. This office must have the proper resources and accountability to ensure that it is serving its mission. The city and our community should support the good work of the Austin Tenants Council.</p> <p>The current land development code places enormous market pressures to redevelop and add housing units on properties which are already zoned for multi-family (apartments). Unfortunately, as these tracts are redeveloped, we are losing the most affordable apartments. When these projects redevelop, the city should use all available tools to help make sure new projects include the maximum community benefit. Maximizing the use of the Density Bonus Program will help to ensure the stock of affordable units is maintained and increased.</p> <p>In terms of preventing and reducing evictions, supporting the work of the Affordable Central Texas and the Austin Housing Conservancy will also reduce displacements. In the end, there is no substitute for simply building more working class housing in the neighborhoods where displacements are occurring. Working with each community, we must find more locations which will allow this type of multi-family development beyond the existing zoning.</p>

Linda O'Neal	I met a man whose rent was raised from \$550 to \$1200, within three years. He stayed, but when his AC unit went out, they took their time fixing it. He broke his lease out of frustration, tried to find another apartment and couldn't because the apartment management reported that he was evicted. He is African American and says the experienced rattled him. He's from East Texas and he says that the racism he has experienced in Austin is far worse. There is an imbalance of power between renters and landlords. The city needs to protect their residents! Philadelphia launched an Eviction Prevention Project, which offers a helpline for tenants in need, connections to legal services and information for at-risk tenants. Austin can do this AND we desperately need affordable housing. I met another well-dressed African-American man at one of the forums. He was newly homeless because of an eviction. The city needs to provide hotel vouchers for people who are in transition due to an eviction. Life spirals out of control very quickly when you have no money or resources. The city has a duty to help and in the long run, helping is so much cheaper.
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5. When considering affordable housing to be supported by the City, whether financial or other support, what are the top 4 or 5 criteria you would use to rank order a project to deem it worthy of support?

Katherine (Kathie) Tovo	<p>I believe that every additional affordable housing unit is needed to help us achieve our goals. I also believe it is my role as an elected official to continue to push to improve the affordable housing opportunities that come before Council to ensure they truly meet our needs as a community. Generally, my efforts on this subject are aimed at improving projects through one or several of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the number or percentage of affordable housing units being offered. • Providing a deeper level of affordability attainable for our least affluent families. • Extending the length of affordability so that units are required to remain affordable for a longer period of time. • Advocating for the largest possible number or percentage of multi-bedroom units along with amenities such as onsite afterschool or quality early childhood programs. I believe that providing family-friendly spaces is crucial to keeping families in our urban core and keeping our city vibrant.
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Danielle Skidmore	<p>The strategic housing blueprint identifies a vast range of strategies to expand affordable housing in Austin. My top criteria to for projects.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promoting Equity - Discrete affordable housing goals are absolutely necessary for each district and neighborhood. While the tools to provide housing will vary for each location, the overarching goal must be to reduce the enormous disparities of housing options in our neighborhood. 2. Reducing Displacements - Preserving existing affordable neighborhoods is critical for community cohesion. Even if individual units are lost during redevelopment projects, projects which include on-site or near-site community benefit of affordable housing must be provided. 3. Maximizing Density - Projects which build the most number of affordable units per acre will be more cost effective to construct and maintain on a per unit basis than a less intense development pattern. Given our limited resources to provide affordable housing, it should be extended to as many families as possible. 4. Expanding Public Transportation Access - Projects should be located along or near our current Capital Metro high frequency transit routes and the Project Connect corridors.
Linda O'Neal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Follow Cleveland's lead in their Lease to Purchase program. Giving renters a chance to earn equity while they pay rent so that they can buy a house is a win-win. Long-time residents are not displaced and people are invested in the city. 2) Would provide better incentives to landlords so that they are giving longer leases to local businesses and residents. This is not rent control, this is rent stabilization. 3) I would absolutely end corporate welfare. Time to invest in the people and not in corporations. 4) I believe in Housing First for the homeless w/ services. I would team up with Loaves and Fishes and get their help. They have an awesome housing first program and it's working!