

2018 Austin City Council Candidates from District 3: 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?

Justin Jacobson

First we have to make sure we maintain the affordable housing stock that we already have. There is no need to make this issue any worse. Utilizing the land that the city already has ownership of, we need to find the partners that will help us transform it into needed units. While doing that, we shouldn't stop land banking in order to be prepared for future demand.

While doing that, we shouldn't stop land banking in order to be prepared for future demand. While those measures are our triage responses, delivering on a Land Use Code rewrite is the most impactful tool we possess. We need the means to build smarter, more efficient, and a greater diversity of housing stock. The success of past density bonus programs has shown what we can do in regards to getting income restricted housing online. Now, we need to find ways to further deepen their leverage while also having them applied more consistently throughout the city. In tandem with that is how we price the fees-in-lieu. We should reexamine them to make sure they are delivering desired result and if any cost adjustment needs to be made. With a rewritten code in hand, we will be better equipped in our reevaluation of our building code and permitting processes that could yield savings.

Susana Almanza

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>Sabino Pio Renteria</p>	<p>I ran for Council to ensure that working and low-income families in Austin are able not just to remain but to thrive and have access to quality services and economic opportunity.</p> <p>Affordability is a multi-pronged challenge that requires multi-pronged solutions, but having access to decent, safe, and affordable housing is arguably the most important one.</p> <p>As a Council Member, I was proud to play a role in the adoption of the Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint because it lays out clear goals that I believe are attainable if we resolve to lead on the innovations and investments it calls for.</p> <p>This is what I have worked to do during my time on Council and before. I championed the creation of a Homestead Preservation District and a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone in East Austin to establish a sustainable fund dedicated to the preservation and creation of affordable housing in a rapidly-gentrifying area of town. I have authored and co-sponsored resolutions and ordinances that have resulted in regulation waivers, zoning reclassifications, and permit fee waivers to allow affordable housing providers like the Housing Authority, Austin Habitat for Humanity, and Mobile Loaves & Fishes, to create hundreds, if not thousands, of affordable homes for Austinites. I have worked to increase the amount of contributions made to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund by private developers. I have advocated for Transit-Oriented Development that includes affordable housing and homeownership opportunities. I have consistently voted to support funding for home-repair programs that allow Austinites to remain in their homes. I supported Council Member Garza's Family Homestead Initiative to make it easier and cheaper for homeowners to make repairs or additions to their own homes. And recently, I advocated for a \$300 million bond for affordable housing, but was glad when my colleagues at Council approved placing Proposition A, a \$250 million bond, on the ballot because that is still the largest proposed affordable housing investment in our city's history.</p> <p>To seriously address our housing crisis in Austin, we need to continue to support initiatives and investments like these, but we also need to create a more equitable land development code, and we need to collaborate with our regional partners including non-profits, private employers, and other governmental jurisdictions to implement these solutions.</p>
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Amit Motwani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SUPPORT THE ENTIRE BOND PACKAGE THIS NOVEMBER, particularly Prop A and E which pave the way for increased affordable housing supply and related supports that indirectly address affordability through manifold mechanisms (detailed in responses below). ● Increase unit supply ASAP, specifically on available public land. As guided (direct quote) by the blueprint recommendations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Preserve: Acquire and rehabilitate affordable homes at-risk, Advance new home ownership models, Create supportive financing environment ○ Produce: Simplify regulations, Use available public land for affordable housing, Expand funding at all levels, Adopt proven policies ● (Speculative) Creatively develop a generic fund that is similar that is modeled on the State’s “rainy day” discretionary fund that is funded through fees or incentive deals with developers and/or large employers that can be used to discretionary cover budget gaps (i.e. not directly fund housing affordability). As such, City might increase affordability that could displace funding from other areas of the budget (that are not affordability oriented), which in turn might be funded by stop-gap discretionary funding from rainy day, potentially circumventing the state-imposed ban on funding affordability through fees. This might at least create a rubber steak among many for State AG office to chew on for a bit while expending fleeting and diminishing political capital.
Jessica Cohen	<p>Our current Euclidian land use code was written in the 80’s and was written to address the large amount of greenfield space Austin had at the time. Now, 30 years later, Austin has almost run out of greenfield space. We need updated land use code and zoning ordinances that reflect the increased population and lack of space to grow. Transects and form based code should be the first steps in rewriting Austin’s land use code. Funding will be a little harder. Bonds are nice but I would prefer alternatives that didn’t raise taxes. I have always championed the carrot over the stick. I believe that with the right incentives, such as increased fee waivers and tax breaks for developers who specifically build low income or affordable housing meeting Austin’s green requirements and make housing affordable up to the 140% HUD MFI, we can encourage developers to build affordable housing while still ensuring their workers are paid a living wage.</p>
James Valadez	<p>I strongly support the Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint and believe that we need to adjust the fee in lieu for affordable housing. Too many times developers are paying into the fee rather than committing to onsite affordable housing. If this continues to be the trend, then we need to ensure that there is adequate funding for community land trusts with other non-profits to help alleviate the burden. The City needs to be thinking strategically by purchasing land today for future use. If current market trends stay on pace, land will continue to increase in value; therefore, purchasing land now for the future is crucial. We also need to be partnering with other jurisdictions to help collaborate on affordable housing, AISD, Travis County and the City of Austin all own land which could be developed or repurposed for affordable housing. Property tax relief is another important factor for affordable housing, we need to ensure that our citizens are aware of current tax emptions as well as implement and expand others. There are numerous ways to help with this initiative, and we need strong leadership at the helm to help implement it.</p>

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?

Justin Jacobson	I believe getting attainable housing for this constituency is going to come primarily once we get a revised Land Use Development Code. With that in hand, we can get the greater diversity of our housing stock we need. This is not only in terms of missing middle supply, but also in the permissible size of structure and lot for single family dwellings. Also, when we both relax the restrictions on AUDs and streamline their permitting process we can help in adding additional housing stock for renters and another means to amortize housing costs for would be home buyers. Exploring ways to reduce costs arising from compliance with Building Code and Permitting requirements shows possibility of lowering overall costs on new developments.
Susana Almanza	The market builds for profit. The private market cannot or will not produce housing that families of average means can afford, it is the responsibility of government to promote the general welfare and to provide this basic human right. The supposedly "free" market will continue to do what it has always done – build for profits. Most Austin housing programs target the 80% MFI for ownership and 60% MFI for rental. Ultimately, the problem with making housing a commodity is that as such, living space will be distributed based on the ability to pay and provided to the extent that it produces a profit. These are not market failures – they are how the market works. But ability to pay is unequal while the need for a place to live is universal.
Sabino Pio Renteria	<p>In Texas, where the Republican-controlled state legislature has taken every opportunity to prevent Austin from implementing housing solutions like inclusionary zoning and affordable housing linkage fees, our options are severely limited. However, there is still a lot we can and should do.</p> <p>We need to recalibrate our density bonus programs throughout the city and consider creating new ones where appropriate to ensure that development that is already taking place includes spaces for affordable housing.</p> <p>My goal is to create diverse multi-generational, mixed-income communities to combat the growing economic segregation in our city. But housing is not the only challenge. Since transportation is the 2nd highest expense for most households, we need to create a multi-modal transportation system that includes a robust and reliable transit network to truly give Austinites a choice in how they move around the city.</p> <p>That's why we need to focus on our major transportation and transit corridors and allow for different housing types and mixed-use developments that allow for housing for families like these to be built – particularly in corridors outside of East Austin that have not already borne a disproportionate amount of the burden.</p>

Amit Motwani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain focus on 80-120% MFI households. The plurality that represents 121+% MFI is far less likely to be priced out of market ● Increased navigation of, funding for, and access to educational programs and financial assistance programs, including low-interest loans and financial counseling provided by Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) that may assist in easing other angles of affordability ● Strategic legislative policy agenda and/or working with local institutions and leveraging public private partnerships to improve access to high quality early childhood education (e.g. full day pre-K for 3 and 4 year olds), again, to ease another angle of affordability as high quality child care is among the highest cost burdens for all families across the income spectrum. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategic legislative policy agenda in concert with other local governments to support “legislation to allow flat dollar-amount Homestead Exemptions” ● “Create a preservation property tax exemption for properties to minimize displacement of low-income renters” ● “Expand the use of shared-equity ownership and mechanisms to preserve and create ownership options for households at 80-120% MFI” ● (Quotations taken directly from Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint, 2017)
Jessica Cohen	<p>As stated above, the COA is going to have to use creative programs that encourage developers, private investors, and communities to work together to build more housing where we can and keep housing affordable where we can't. Fighting the law of supply and demand will be difficult but with the right application of pressure, we can increase the supply of housing within the city without further displacing long time community residents or keeping the very people that make Austin run from living in the city. We should be using HUD's 140% MFI for our baseline.</p>
James Valadez	<p>I think community land trusts have proven to be attainable and consistent, but we need more funding and land in order to help families above 80% MFI. I think education programs can be effective in helping bridge this gap. With credit repair programs, and homebuyers' credits, education can be the pathway to home ownership. One other way would be to encourage on site workforce housing to help with families between 80 - 120% MFI.</p>
<p>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?</p>	
Justin Jacobson	<p>First, make sure that employers know the benefits of ensuring their employees have access to affordable housing, encouraging them to fund efforts for the need. Conversations should be had with groups that might be interested in providing employee housing, such as Oracle did with their complex apartment acquisition. From there we could find way to mix in affordable unit capacity not only for their employees, but possibly nearby residents. The city could also explore ways to make it attractive for large scale companies to make investments in employee housing when they otherwise would not.</p>

Susana Almanza	<p>Create programs that encourage developers and owners to offer long (perhaps five-to-seven year) leases to tenants at all income levels who commit to staying in a property, given that predictability benefits landlords and tenants alike. Create a tax advantage account (like an individual retirement account) where the default choice would be a blended and diversified bond and equity fund. This could be used for limited purposes related to housing, such as for a down payment for a home purchase. It could be funded by rebalancing the federal subsidies so that they are targeted to households who want to become homeowners, or renters who need an emergency fund to pay their rent during a crisis. Develop a sustainable and scalable Rent-To-Own program, where a financial product that uses Federal Housing Administration or state Housing Finance Agency programs for the entity who owns the house while the occupants are renting. The mortgage would be assumable, and the landlord/owner would transfer a portion of the loan to the tenant/homebuyer when they are able to accumulate the necessary 3.5 percent down payment for the carved out rental payments and meet other underwriting criteria. The transfer would come with predictable costs to the buyer, and there would be visibility for both parties to the transaction.</p>
Sabino Pio Renteria	<p>First, we need to start with the fact that affordability is tied to more than just housing. One of my priorities is building economic opportunity for Austin families. That means that we have to work to support our own small businesses and seek out employers who offer good paying jobs that don't necessarily require advanced degrees (or that support educational opportunities if they do require them).</p> <p>However, employers in tech and other industries are coming to Austin whether we recruit them or not. And it's in their own interest to ensure that their employees are able to find affordable places to live and have access to reliable transportation. So we should find areas where we can work together to provide these opportunities.</p> <p>The City of Austin already offers services like down payment assistance and the HousingSmarts program that provide resources to first-time homebuyers, like financial education and counseling. There are also non-profit organizations that offer similar services. We should encourage employers to support this ongoing work. But we should also support more programs that offer assistance to renters as well because not everyone has the opportunity (or chooses) to be a homeowner.</p> <p>In short, if large employers do their part and assist our non-profits and other providers to build and preserve the affordable housing that we need, their employees and our city will be better off.</p>

Amit Motwani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cost benefit analyses and case studies of Employer Housing Assistance (EHA) must be (re) packaged and communicated to employers; potential avenues might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Professional associations (e.g. HR/HC associations, local chambers ○ One-on-one meetings with progressive and motivated CEO's. ○ Bringing in executives and leaders who've implemented these models successfully (e.g. as depicted in the above references)with high demonstrable yield to speak to the above. If/When compelled, potential avenues for EHA's comprise of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demand Side Support (more immediately actionable) : Direct Financial assistance support might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Forgivable loans for down payment assistance down payment and reduce turnover ○ Partnerships with CDFI's to provide access to low interest loans, financial and credit counseling and support ● Supply Side Support (might require far more creativity): creating/leveraging partnerships with Nonprofits and Technical Assistance groups to potentially use property to develop community land trusts or apply other financial resources to support developers in establishment of reasonable-cost to affordable housing options. ● All EHA support should demonstrate a heavier focus on lower wage staff, i.e. lower MFI households and potentially might also engage non-employee low-MFI residents.
Jessica Cohen	<p>Corporations can start by following Oracle's example and providing affordable housing for their employees while allowing the public to rent in their facility as well. The hard truth is that Austin is just as reliant on its lower income workers as any other city. If these people have to drive two hours to get to work, you're either going to have to compensate them for that somehow or they'll work elsewhere. Employers will either lose out over the long run by increasing wages or, with the right incentives, could be encouraged to give up some of that parking and build affordable housing on their campuses.</p>
James Valadez	<p>The relationships between for-profit entities, non-profit entities, neighborhoods and municipalities is key when tackling an issue of this nature. One of my first actions if elected would be to bring together as many key stakeholders as possible to be sure that all voices are present and heard. We would begin crafting creative solutions to the housing needs of those who really make our city run and I would strive to provide housing to those most vulnerable to being displaced in or around the area in which they work.</p>
<p>4.What city policies and roles can the city play to prevent formal and informal evictions among low income tenants?</p>	

Justin Jacobson	<p>Identifying a service provider, for example the Austin Tenets Council or a nonprofit, and giving it the adequate resources to help renters before they get to the point of eviction, would help in mitigating any negative effects. We need to ensure that this service provider can direct folks to organizations that can provide a deeper portfolio of aid services, the possible assistance to help negotiate an agreement between the landlord and tenet, or give emergency funds to help meet rent. When approached by a renter for these options of help, there should also be an intake process to see if there aren't other programs or partners in place to make sure that this person isn't chronically dealing with the situation.</p>
Susana Almanza	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a City-Wide Living Wage of \$15 hr. • Provide right to counsel in eviction cases (need to establish Right To Counsel fund) • Universal housing voucher program. Under such a program, everyone earning below a certain income level would get a voucher • Increase funding to Austin Tenants Council & other groups that provide education, counseling and legal services to tenants • Ensure that the Tenant Notification & Relocation Assistance Program is fully funded & administered • Use Public land to build low-income & moderate housing • Create Anti-Eviction Committees • Put tenants & residents in control of their housing & decisions that affect them.
Sabino Pio Renteria	<p>Evictions and displacement have destabilizing repercussions that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable members of our community. They can impact job security and restrict educational opportunities.</p> <p>That's why I authored the resolution that led to the creation of the Tenant Notification and Relocation Assistance Program and why I supported Mayor Pro Tem Tovo's resolution that called for a "resources for renters" web page to compile a list of services and programs available and more importantly, her call for the creation of an eviction counseling service that would provide for better representation of renters facing eviction.</p> <p>I've also supported funding for organizations like Building and Strengthening Tenant Action (BASTA) which seeks to empower Austin renters by helping them organize associations to advocate for better living conditions and fight against unfair management practices and evictions.</p> <p>I will continue working to support programs like this in partnership with Austin's housing advocates and leaders.</p>

Amit Motwani	<p>1. Renters are typically lower MFI; evictions are most commonly caused by missed rent payments, a direct result of affordability challenges. As such, support and assistance in other avenues of affordability that factor into household costs is integral to mitigating eviction risk; in addition, lower MFI renters and families who are facing eviction are typically confronting more than one issue associated with immediate need and often require more profound intervention and support to solve for systemic problems that might perpetuate affordability crises (e.g. inaccessible costs of medication, food insecurity, transportation challenges, lack of access to child care precludes retention and/or attainment of employment). As such, increased investment in Health and human services, particularly coordinated social service and crisis intervention support is a critical step</p> <p>2. Improved access to economic opportunity is inextricable from this conversation, as improved wages would certainly mitigate potential for evictions. Intentional and coordinated efforts to bring “soft-skill” and other applicable middle-skills job training and education (and related supports as mentioned above) that weave together public (City county)/private (employers, chambers, schools, nonprofit service providers) partnerships must be fostered. 3. To be clear, rent and utility payment assistance programs + financial counseling and money management programs are foundational elements the above listed formula.</p>
Jessica Cohen	<p>In the past, it often fell to religious organizations to assist the needy. These days, those same organizations are underfunded and often strained by the level of assistance needed. In this day and age, it's well past time for the municipal government to step in and assist at a higher level. In the past, I have been a renter who's had difficulty paying rent. The hardest challenge was determining where I could get help. I believe there should be a committee tasked with gathering all the possible sources of assistance, getting them together, pooling their resources, and publishing them in an easy to find place so that people know where they can get assistance. The COA will also need to set aside some of its budget to finance this public assistance. This could be supported through bonds or by getting the State legislature to lower Austin's property taxes (Read “Robin Hood” education recapture fund.)</p>
James Valadez	<p>Sadly, this happens too often. I believe that a lot of people are unaware of the legal resources available to them as well as their rights as tenants. If we can help to have this information readily available with quick access, I believe it will help people understand the process and could prevent unwarrantable evictions.</p>
<p>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?</p>	
Justin Jacobson	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Location of housing in high economic opportunity areas/ensuring equity throughout the city. 2. Proximity of housing to transit options. 3. Quantity of multi bedroom units 4. Proximity to schools. 5. Proximity of housing to other community services.

Susana Almanza	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will it serve those most in need of housing: poor, working poor, families, elderly, handicap • Will it provide 2, 3 & 4 bedrooms and 40 to 99 years of affordability • Provide 60 percent of units at the following MFI's: 20% of units at 0-30% MFI; 20% at 30%-50 MFI; 20% at 50%-65% MFI • Access to public transportation • Access to grocery stores, doctors, schools, etc.
Sabino Pio Renteria	<p>When making decisions on prioritizing the resources available for affordable housing projects, these are some of the considerations I make, among many others:</p> <p>Is this project maximizing the amount of Austin families that we can serve without compromising other important quality of life requirements?</p> <p>Is this project helping us combat economic segregation and furthering our goal of creating diverse and accessible multi-generational, mixed-income communities?</p> <p>Is this a project that will allow families and individuals to be in proximity or have access to jobs, schools, healthcare centers, parks, libraries, grocery stores, and other quality services? and</p> <p>Does this project help further our goals to support a multi-modal transportation network and a reliable transit system?</p>
Amit Motwani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear mandate driven by community engagement and consensus • Favorable ratio/mix of of rental and purchase units based on affordability as derived by percentage of MFI (i.e. generally in line with housing blueprint estimates), inclusive of appropriate affordability periods. • Appropriate alignments of incentives with respect to density bonuses and proximity to downtown and/or • Developer/s with demonstrated track record within context of public/private/nonprofit partnerships (including demonstrated good faith in development of deeply affordable units in aforementioned projects) • Potential for plausible development of EDC to assure avenues of economic growth to tether sustainability of non-lucrative but morally imperative affordability measures
Jessica Cohen	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Affordable for those making up to the HUD 140% MFI. b) Impact on community and community resources c) Limited displacement d) Ability for the growth pay for itself without using fees-in-lieu e) Green development including GSI, rain/AC condensation recapture, and limited impervious cover

James Valadez	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <u>Location of project</u>: It's imperative that we help stop displacement, so a project's location is important to ensure people continue to live and work in the same community they have been. to reach our goal of 20,000 units we need to be sure we are getting enough units on projects.2. <u>Quantity of units</u>: In order to reach our goal of 20,000 units we need to be sure we are getting enough units on projects.3. <u>MFI % offered</u>: We can't have all projects be 30% or 80% MFI we are leaving too many people uncounted for. If projects contained an array of different MFIs, we could help that many more families and individuals.4. <u>Bedroom counts</u>: Studio apartments can't be the only affordable housing stock, we need more bedrooms to fit families and individuals wanting to start families.5. <u>School & Transit options</u>: With our schools declining in attendance and transit options slim, it's important to keep these factors at the forefront to help families stay within their communities.
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