

District 8 Candidate - Bobby Levinski

1. What ideas do you envision to reach significant progress with the goals identified in the Blueprint?

I agree that, in order to address our housing crisis, we should be looking towards the guidance of the Strategic Housing Blueprint and implementing the actionable directives that have already been vetted by the community and council. The Blueprint recognizes that the housing shortage exists up and down the housing spectrum, and we'll need different solutions to affect the production of units to fill those gaps. Establishing and administering the Affordable Housing Incentives Taskforce was one of my first big policy initiatives when I worked as a policy advisor for CM Kim (circa 2005-2007). It was during that process that we established the City's core affordable housing values of deeper affordability, longer affordability, and geographic dispersion. I remain committed to these values.

On the income-restricted side, we need to be build significantly more public housing, which is why I am supportive of Proposition A. We need to use this money wisely and leverage the funds as much as possible. To me, the priorities will be land-banking/acquiring City-owned lands (especially like the missed opportunity at the Grove), broadening the use of community land trusts, and implementing wide-spread and meaningful density bonus programs, all of which help us provide housing for lower-income areas in areas of town with higher land costs.

The City Council should partner with nonprofit housing providers on city and other publicly owned lands to build housing in areas of the city where land prices are often cost-prohibitive for affordable housing builders. I would also support requirements, when the City sells or long-term leases land, that would require the construction of on-site, income-restricted housing. I would also prioritize funds for the preservation of units that, with a little City investment, we can extend the life of buildings and ensure that units remain affordable for longer. To fill gaps on the market-rate side, we need to focus on making the development review process quicker and more predictable to minimize the time, costs and risks that developers take on--and, in turn, hopefully increase production. Much of the debate within the community is spent on entitlements, which I can understand, but entitlements are only one piece of a much larger puzzle. From my experiences, the City has a lot of room for improving its development review process, which would limit the City's impacts on driving up costs. Ideas I'd like to pursue include working with the City Manager to adopt employee retention and path-to-success policies to keep quality reviewers so not to lose their experience and knowledge that help site plans get reviewed accurately and efficiently; working with Austin-based architects to develop pre-approved, ready-to-build plans for low-impact structures like ADUs; and

working with the City Manager to better empower project managers to resolve conflicts between reviewing departments.

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?

Please see the last paragraph in the response to Question 1. In addition to the above, we should relax regulations in areas of desired growth as indicated by the Imagine Austin Growth Concept Map, such as within town centers and along designated corridors. We should also be investing in our labor force and in trade education to ensure we have a healthy construction industry, so workers can earn fair wages and projects are not slowed down by labor shortages.

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?

As a large employer, the City of Austin should continue and expand upon the programs it makes available to its employees to help with homebuyer education and downpayment assistance. I also like what AISD has been doing with developing housing for teachers on AISD surplus land, and this is one of the areas that the City of Austin could partner with them to help the school district meet its budgetary needs until the state finally fixes the state educational finance system. If there are opportunities for the City of Austin to do the same for its own employees, I think we should look at that as an option--especially on underutilized City land.

Employer-assisted housing makes a lot of sense when one considers the history of housing, and I'd be interested in discussing how the City can help make the pitch to employers to make such investments in their workforce. My preference would be that these programs would go through a third-party partnership with a non-profit housing provider.

4. What city policies and roles can the city play to prevent formal and informal evictions among low income tenants?

Texas is not a tenant-friendly state, but that doesn't mean we aren't without tools to increase tenant protections and assistance. While working as a policy advisor to CM Morrison and later for MPT Tovo, I helped make available funding for rental assistance programs to provide emergency assistance for families in need--with a particular emphasis on families with students, to prevent students from being forced to switch schools in the middle of a school year. Additionally, we developed an emergency tenant displacement response plan to help address the needs of displaced residents when renters are forced to immediately vacate a property in response to condemnation and other emergency situations. This later formed the basis of the Tenant Relocation

Ordinance. And, we also expanded the CAF program to help low-income residents get relief from their utility bills and not face disconnections (and thus costly reconnection fees). I raise these examples of the kinds of policy that I have worked on, and to emphasize my commitment to fight to address renters' needs.

In the last few years, there hasn't been enough attention paid to the impacts of the council's policies on renters. In a majority renter city and especially with the very large number of renters that are living paycheck to paycheck, it is imperative that the council consider the costs they are imposing on these families through regressive fee structures. I would like to reduce our City's reliance on flat-rate fees which have a disproportionate impact on our lowest income families and those on fixed incomes, while also reducing the utility's deposits, which add to the financial burden of individual's getting in a rental unit.

On a broader level, these types of situations are exactly why we must be cognizant of the impacts that our land use decisions can have on lower-income families. What happened on East Riverside over the last decade is shameful. Thousands of families were displaced to make way for luxury apartments, and the City did very little to help address the foreseeable displacement that would occur. The East Riverside Corridor Master Plan and the PUDs of that era gave away significant increases in entitlements for free, with little consideration of the housing needs of the existing residents in the area. In the absence of a will to push the envelope a bit on our interpretation of Section 214.095 of the Local Government Code, we must at least ensure that we are prioritizing our housing needs when we are negotiating for increased entitlements.

Additionally, we should prioritize preservation dollars in areas experiencing rapid levels of displacement and track projects where our affordability periods are soon to expire for potential reinvestment.

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?

- a) Nonprofit. Generally, I prefer that we prioritize our public resources to support the development of housing by nonprofit and governmental entities. Private developers do have a role in building income-restricted housing, but unfortunately I have seen too many examples of how the system is gamed. Removing the profit incentive is the best way to make sure the housing benefits for residents in need are actually achieved from our limited resources. Where we are using a private partner, we need to make sure we have teeth in our enforcement and perhaps even a third-party nonprofit to help place the families in the housing.

- b) Location. We have vast areas of our city that are housing deficient--they lack sufficient affordable and income-restricted housing to support families of diverse backgrounds and incomes. Often times these areas are considered "high opportunity" but I don't like such labeling, because it loses the emphasis on the fact that these areas are deficient of necessary housing infrastructure. We should be looking for ways to increase our geographic dispersion of income-restricted housing.
- c) Access to Transit. Whether we are bringing public transportation to the project or the project is locating in an area served by public transportation, mobility of the residents is important to ensure they are able to address their daily needs and don't have to spend hours on a bus to get to a grocery store or to work. That said, there may be some projects that are further out that may not have access to great transit but still fulfill housing needs for the area. For example, I would have supported the Foundation Communities project in the Four Points area, where housing available to workers in the area are limited.
- d) Long-term Affordability. As noted above, I have been long-committed to the housing core values of longer-term affordability, at deeper levels, and that is geographically dispersed. This is generally why I favor models, such as community land trusts or developing on City-owned land, where we have more tools to ensure that we are maintaining the affordability of the housing for generations to come.
- e) Better Builder. Any use of the city's resources should be in line with the City's values. Fair wages and construction worker safety requirements are part of that. I would prioritize (if we have not otherwise required) projects that comply with the Better Builder program.