

Mayoral Candidate - Laura Morrison

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

To achieve units 20,000 units affordable at 30% MFI in today's Austin market will require a combination of public resources, ideally deployed in conjunction with experienced nonprofit developers and other governmental partners. A feasible plan for progress could include the following elements:

- Place public properties in Community Land Trusts (CLTs). The City of Austin must take the lead by immediately placing its own public properties in a land trust reserved for affordable housing or other critical public needs, and encourage other local governmental entities, including AISD, Cap Metro and Travis County, to take similar actions. As land prices in Austin continue to escalate, use of public lands is one of the most effective tools we have to create deeply affordable housing for residents.
- Establish a land-banking program. In addition to CLTs, the city should establish a land-banking program to allow government entities or nonprofits to acquire land with the purpose of developing affordable or workforce housing. Properties in a land bank may also be sold to a nonprofit or private developer, conditioned on a binding agreement that the site will be used to create permanent affordable housing.
- Implement a commercial fee-in-lieu density bonus program. Austin already has a number of density bonus programs for residential properties. These allow a proposed development to achieve greater entitlements, including increased height or density or a reduction in parking requirements; in exchange, the developer must either provide affordable units onsite or pay into a fee-in-lieu fund to support affordable housing in another location. The city should act to extend the fee-in-lieu component of its current density bonus programs to all commercial properties in which a developer seeks additional entitlements above what is allowed by existing zoning. This additional funding could be reserved for building or rehabilitating deeply affordable housing at 30% MFI or below.

As a council member, I raised this issue during the adoption of the Downtown Austin Plan. At the time, staff advised that the market would not support such a fee.

Accepting that, I ensured that the framework was devised to include a fee, but to temporarily set it to \$0 per square foot, enabling a simple change to the fee rather than a more complicated revision. That simple change is long overdue.

- Consider TIFs for affordable housing. Tax Increment Financing may be an effective tool to direct more funds to affordable housing, particularly in rapidly gentrifying areas where new development is pushing out low-income residents or in high-opportunity locations that do not yet have affordable housing.

- Promote the Pay for Success Model for Permanent Supportive Housing. This model, now implemented in Austin, will accept private funds with a potential return to the investors from governmental jurisdictions, to support PSH, based upon the well-founded premise that providing housing and services is less costly than providing public services to many of the people who are not housed.
As a Council Member from 2008-2014, I was a strong supporter of mechanisms and projects that reach deep affordability levels, and promoted the adoption of land banks and community land trusts. Since finishing my terms on Council, I have continued advocacy as a member of the board of directors for HousingWorks Austin and ECHO (Ending Community Homelessness Coalition). In particular, with ECHO, I was an active participant in developing the Pay For Success model that we now have in place.

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?

This is an extremely difficult challenge in Austin's current market conditions, as the private sector will always build to maximize profits, and with the continued influx of highly paid workers, there is little incentive for the market to provide anything but high end housing. Further, I believe our limited public resources should be focused on lower-income residents who are in much greater need of assistance. Austin can, through a community-driven planning process, develop zoning to allow a greater variety of smaller housing options, including townhomes, duplexes, accessory dwelling units, mobile homes and tiny homes, in appropriate locations. However, given current land and construction costs, even these smaller products are likely to be quite expensive. Any significant relief is dependent on Austin partnering with other municipalities for legislative changes, including fixing the broken school finance system and legalizing common affordability tools such as inclusionary zoning. As mayor, I will prioritize these issues in the city's legislative agenda, and initiate a successful, community-driven planning process to ensure a variety of affordable housing options are available in every part of Austin.

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?

In general, the mayor and the city must make clear that this is a priority when considering zoning cases such as the recent Grove case, where our clear priorities need to take precedence over high dollar land purchases that are done with an expectation of zoning approval and high dollar housing.

Unfortunately, Texas law prohibits many tools commonly used in other states to require private sector participation in addressing affordability, such as linkage fees, rent stabilization or inclusionary zoning. With no legal leverage to require such contributions,

we must rely on the bully pulpit. As mayor, I would mount a campaign to educate large employers, particularly newly arrived tech firms, on the extreme challenges Austin's lower-paid workers now face in finding housing they can afford, and encourage these companies to make substantial annual contributions to local nonprofits that provide deeply affordable housing or directly to the city's own housing fund. I believe the most effective way to do this is to put a human face on the problem ("Here's your favorite barista, here's how much she makes a month, here's the rent she can afford....if you like your latte, give today to keep Austin affordable for everyone!").

Private sector contributions to affordable housing should be publicized in a clever, entertaining way to encourage competitive donations from other firms. For firms with highly paid employees, we should also encourage companies to promote individual employee giving through a company-sponsored matching donation program. In some cases, it may be worth discussing whether a firm can provide some or all of the land or funding for workforce housing for its own employees.

San Francisco provides an example to share with large employers, of what Austin needs to avoid in this regard. Recent reports indicate that housing affordability has so limited the work force that some restaurants, unable to find service staff, are turning to a self-service model. Finally, no city incentives should be given to any project or business that does not include a substantial affordable housing component, either through the construction of on-site units or through significant financial contributions to support housing elsewhere.

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

It is imperative that Austin renters be protected to the fullest extent allowed by law. As a former two-term Council Member, I have a strong record in working for the rights and protections of tenants, including:

- Tenant relocation standards (Resolution 20121108-059)
- Non-discrimination based on source of income (Resolution 20140417-048)
- Code enforcement of substandard housing (Resolution 20131024-063)
- Response to emergency displacement of tenants (Resolution 20121101-039)

As mayor, I will lead efforts to strengthen renter protections, retain existing affordable rental housing, and initiate a plan to ensure affordable rental options are available in every Austin zip code. I will also work to ensure that anti-displacement policies are a key part of growth planning.

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?

My top ranking criteria would include:

- a) Actual rents or purchase costs of affordable units. I would give preference to projects with affordable units targeted to lower Median Family Income (MFI) levels. Austin's current density bonus programs allow MFI levels as high as 120%, which I believe is too high in general to warrant public subsidies.
- b) I would also support recalibrating the MFI the city uses for affordable units based on the median income level of the area in which a proposed project will be located if that area's MFI is below the Travis County MSA MFI. For example, MFI for a family of four in Travis County is \$81,400 – yet according to the city demographer, the MFI levels for Council Districts 1 through 4 are barely half that. In District 1, the MFI is \$42,150; in District 2, \$42,650; in District 3, \$36,185; and in District 4, \$39,200. Clearly, affordability metrics based on the countywide MFI will not produce housing that is actually affordable to current residents of these districts.