

Austin Candidate Forum Questions

(April 4th, 2009 Coordinated Council Forum)

Candidate's Name: Lee Leffingwell

Place Running For: Austin Mayor

Please Return to Shawn Shillington at Urban@Austinist.com by March 30, 2008

You

1. In what part of Austin do you live? How long have you lived here?

Lee Leffingwell: I live in the Balcones Woods neighborhood. I was previously a resident of the Wilshire Woods neighborhood in East Austin. I am a native Austinite and grew up in the Bouldin neighborhood in South Austin.

City Life

2. What is the city's role in creating jobs?

Lee Leffingwell: I believe the City must take an active role in helping to save and create jobs. As mayor, the primary focus of my economic plan would be to help local businesses succeed, and I've made several proposals to accomplish this, including establishing a standing city commission on local business to give Austin entrepreneurs a focused, permanent group of advocates at City Hall, expanding technical assistance and free support services available to local business owners, and finding ways to change our City purchasing procedures to award more City contracts to locally owned businesses. I also believe the City should play an active role in helping to diversify our local economy and attract desirable new employers to Austin, including renewable energy, medical technology, and digital media companies. When this requires consideration of tax incentive proposals, my criteria are strict: the employer must offer a profound benefit to the community as a whole, it must be located in the Desired Development Zone, it must provide jobs for people who live here now, the agreement must be time-limited, and most importantly, the agreement must be performance-based (additional tax revenues and new jobs promised must be delivered before any incentive is awarded) so that the net revenue impact to the City and Austin taxpayers is positive. I've supported tax incentives in the past and will again if they meet these criteria, but my strong preference is for attracting new employers to Austin by maintaining a safe, beautiful, well-functioning city with a unique culture, a low tax rate, a stable regulatory environment, and reliable basic services and infrastructure. Finally, I believe that the City should play an active role on job training initiatives, and as part of my platform I've proposed to create a "Green Collar Jobs Council" to coordinate the efforts of all local workforce development groups and ensure that Austin workers have the skills needed to take advantage of new job opportunities.

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3. What should the city do to address conflicts between music lovers and neighborhood residents? Should the city implement any recommendations of the Live Music Task Force that have not already been implemented?

Lee Leffingwell: Generally I believe we have an obligation to protect the interests of neighborhood residents first. At the same time I believe we must do everything we possibly can to accommodate live music, which is vital to the economy and culture of Austin. The City Council recently amended the noise ordinance to provide a permitting process that allows for public input and potential restrictions on music venues to ensure compatibility with nearby residences, and I supported that amendment. Included with those revisions is a one-year review to determine if the new process is effective.

4. What role do you think public art plays in the creation of the built environment? Do you consider public art an important part of urban development? If so, what are some ways to include and finance art in development?

Lee Leffingwell: I believe public art is a critical component of the built environment. Whenever possible, I'll strongly support proposals that include public art as part of urban development projects. I believe public art should be required of any urban redevelopment proposed for public land. To the extent feasible given budget constraints, I would support expanding the City's Arts In Public Places program.

5. Sixth Street is arguably Austin's best-known brand, a National Registered Historic District, and the gateway between the Waller Creek District and the heart of downtown. Sixth Street is also primarily a nightlife district - crowded most nights, but quiet during the day. Are those in conflict? How should Sixth Street change?

Lee Leffingwell: Yes, the lack of activity during the day on Sixth Street is an enormous missed opportunity, given especially the proximity of the Austin Convention Center. We should do everything possible to diversify the businesses on Sixth Street in an effort to make it a center of daytime activity, as well as a nighttime destination.

6. The Waller Creek revitalization project could dramatically improve a sizable portion of downtown. As it stands today, which aspects of the plan are you for and which are you against?

Lee Leffingwell: I am for the Waller Creek revitalization project. There are no aspects of the plan, as I understand it, that I oppose.

Transportation

7. Access to downtown is difficult, and bound to become more difficult, due to congestion on our highways and arterial streets. What strategies would you support to make it easier for people to get downtown? How should those strategies be funded?

Lee Leffingwell: I believe the future of transportation in Austin – not just for the purpose of facilitating access to downtown, but for easing crisis-level traffic

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congestion citywide – must involve making significant new investments in roads, mass transit, bike lanes, and sidewalks. We especially need to pursue a viable rail system and dramatically improved bus system, and to make bicycling and walking viable forms of commuting. Accordingly, my platform includes a proposal to hold a transportation-only bond election by 2010 to help fund exactly these kinds of investments, as well as a proposal to hold an election as soon as possible – ideally also by 2010 – to authorize the expansion of our rail system. I also believe in pursuing tactical transportation solutions like more HOV lanes, improved signalization wherever possible, better traffic incident management, promoting carpooling and telecommuting, and encouraging the growth of programs like Austin Car Share, which I was proud to sponsor as a Council member.

8. Part of the Envision Central Texas “Vision” is more transportation choices, including transit options such as commuter rail, light rail, and rapid bus. Will you support planning for and implementing transportation choices, both as connectors of towns and activity centers and as a tool to guide future land-use? Do you support the streetcar system proposed as part of the Downtown Plan?

Lee Leffingwell: Yes.

9. Bicycles are a cheap, effective way to meet many of our transportation, environmental and fitness goals. What are three things the City should do to encourage biking? Are you a cyclist? If so, how do you use your bike?

Lee Leffingwell: I ride my bike recreationally once or twice a month. I’ve ridden my bike to work in the past, and will do so again in the future. I believe the single most important thing we can do to promote bicycling and make it safer is improve and expand our bicycle infrastructure, which I wholeheartedly support. (As noted above, I’ve proposed holding a bond election by 2010 specifically to invest in transportation infrastructure, including new bike lanes.) I also support ensuring that bike lanes and bicycle-safe designs are incorporated into all future road improvement and road construction projects. I’m very supportive of adopting the widespread use of sharrow lane markings. I’m enthusiastic about the recommendation made by the Street Smarts Task Force to create an advisory Bicycle and Pedestrian Commission, and the idea of regular, multi-jurisdictional public meetings to review and discuss transportation issues as they impact bicycling. Finally I’d like to see the City follow up on the recommended effort to deliver regular, affordable bicycle traffic safety classes, and the broad distribution of regularly updated bike maps (with frequent updates online).

10. Most Austin residents pay about \$5 a month for a transportation user fee on their utility bill to support transportation projects, but automobile projects get far more funding than bicycle projects. Would you support allowing bicyclists to opt for their user fee to go toward bike projects?

Lee Leffingwell: The user fee is primarily used for street preventive maintenance, which benefits bike riders as well as motorists, so I’m not sure this would be in order.

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11. The Great Streets program has shown promise on many streets downtown, but other streets have not seen any improvements years after implementation of the program. How should we speed up progress improving the walkability of Austin's streets?

Lee Leffingwell: We can improve our sidewalks mainly through investments of the kind that would be part of the transportation bond election I've proposed for 2010.

Parks

12. What are the elements of great urban parks? How should the City, or the City and private-sector partners, create and maintain quality parks and open space downtown and around transit centers?

Lee Leffingwell: The fundamental element of a great urban park is people, which means that great parks should include facilities and activities that attract them, whether that is food vendors, art projects, interactive features (the Liz Carpenter Fountain at Butler Park is a great example), managed recreational activity, or even very limited retailing. As with public art, I believe open space and park space should be a priority for urban developments, and a requirement for those that involve redevelopment of public land.

13. In light of tight budgets, how can the City conserve, restore, and improve our parks and fulfill long-standing objectives like the Boardwalk Trail at Lady Bird Lake?

Lee Leffingwell: We have to protect adequate funding to maintain and improve our parks, expand park space wherever and whenever we can, and still pursue critical projects like the Boardwalk. It won't be easy given our current economic situation, but if I'm elected mayor it will be a top priority. Great parks are a vital component of our community's quality of life.

Crime

14. Do you think Art Acevedo has done a good job so far as Police Chief? What changes do you think should be made to the ways Austin deals with crime?

Lee Leffingwell: Yes, I believe Chief Acevedo has done a good job, although I didn't and don't support his proposal to allow APD to take DNA samples from people who have been arrested for Class B misdemeanors. Generally speaking, the Austin Police Department can always do a better job of building stronger community relations.

15. Many downtown businesses and visitors complain about panhandling. Should steps be taken to curb panhandling? Would you support adjusting current panhandling ordinances?

Lee Leffingwell: I believe we have a major homelessness problem in Austin that needs to be solved. While I believe existing panhandling and vagrancy laws should be strictly enforced to ensure that Austin residents, tourists, business patrons, and properties are protected, I believe the most effective approach to solving our homelessness problem over the long term centers around treatment strategies and attention to broad issues

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like housing and job training. Overall, I believe we must do a much better job of addressing the problem of chronic homelessness caused by mental illness and substance abuse, and do it by making more resources and better programs available for that purpose. Importantly, I believe we must be certain that we are treating homeless persons in Austin with the same level of respect that every person deserves, while actively helping to break the cycle of homelessness.

Urban Development

16. Will Wynn estimated that 80% of the taxes generated by downtown are used to subsidize city services and maintenance in other parts of the city. Should more of the property taxes generated downtown be used to help downtown? How would you improve city services and maintenance services downtown?

Lee Leffingwell: I generally agree with the mayor's estimate. However, it seems clear that if most downtown property tax revenue weren't used to subsidize the cost of services to central city and suburban neighborhoods, the City would not be able to afford to provide them. That's a very good argument for continuing to invest (and expanding our investment) in downtown services and infrastructure – not only to create an even more vibrant “living room” for Austin, but also to generate expanded “exportable” tax revenue over the long term.

17. If you agree that sprawl is not a desirable development pattern and that a strong core is necessary for a strong city, what are some ways you would discourage sprawl, but encourage urban density and good urban design?

Lee Leffingwell: Sprawl is not a desirable development pattern and I support dense, mixed-use development in the urban core. As mayor I'll continue to support policies and make planning and zoning decisions that slow the former and advance the latter. One example of how city government can help prevent sprawl is the recent effort I led to enact an amendment to the City's land development code which enables old commercial development, like that at the Y at Oak Hill, to improve and modernize at no more than existing impervious cover levels so long as on-site water quality controls are provided and funds are paid by developers to purchase and dedicate open space in the Barton Springs Zone sufficient to maintain SOS impervious cover levels on a composite basis. That new policy will act as a deterrent to sprawl by encouraging modernization of existing development - as well as modernization of water quality controls - instead of forcing new development outside of the city's jurisdiction. One of the ways in which the City can and should work to facilitate mixed-use density in urban areas is to pursue every viable means of promoting affordable housing, especially through the judicious use of the 2006 affordable housing bond funding.

18. There have been problems implementing some neighborhood plans. What will you do to ensure consistent and fair implementation of the comprehensive plan? How would you engage the public in the development of a comprehensive plan?

Lee Leffingwell: I believe the most important step toward ensuring a successful comprehensive planning effort is to create and appoint a citizens' advisory committee

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to oversee the process, from beginning to end. In order for our comprehensive plan to have the buy-in it needs from the community to instruct our growth over the long term, the process must be citizen-driven rather than consultant-driven. Neighborhood plans should be respected in the comprehensive planning process, but I believe it's reasonable to believe that the comprehensive plan could necessitate some modifications. In those cases, I believe that each proposed modification should be presented to the neighborhood for approval.

19. Most social services in Austin are concentrated downtown. How are the social service providers, their clients, downtown businesses, our community and visitors affected by the location of these services downtown? Would you change the existing conditions?

Lee Leffingwell: I think social services should be delivered where the people who need them most can access them most easily. In some – but not all – cases, this means downtown. Where services and service providers can be moved from the downtown area without negatively impacting those who need them most, I support doing so.

20. Are you committed to the concept of nodal (also referred to as activity centers) growth, as an alternative to sprawl development, as found in the Envision Central Texas “Vision” and the CAMPO 2035 Draft Growth Concept?

Lee Leffingwell: Yes, enthusiastically.

21. Do you think tearing down an existing 100-unit apartment complex and replacing it with a 200-unit complex increases or decreases overall housing costs? What other relevant effects does this type of redevelopment have?

Lee Leffingwell: I think that's impossible to know in the abstract. Ideally the answer would be yes, but it would obviously depend on the project.

22. Do you think Austin is better now than it was 10 years ago? Do you think it will be better in 10 years than it is now?

Lee Leffingwell: In my view, in some ways it's better and in some ways it's worse. Obviously everyone has different standards by which they define “better.” I only know that the city has changed significantly in ten years and will again in the next ten, if for no other reason than our dramatic ongoing population growth. But I'm very optimistic about our future. With strong, steady leadership focused on fundamentals – jobs, traffic, public safety, social services, environmental protection, open government – I believe we can get through these tough times, and the tough times still ahead, and get back on track to a better future for every citizen of Austin.

Lee Leffingwell: Thanks for the opportunity to answer these questions. I'm looking forward to the upcoming candidate forum. More information about my campaign is available at AustinLeadership.com. I ask for your vote on Saturday, May 9th.