

Austin Candidate Forum Questions

(April 4th, 2009 Coordinated Council Forum)

Candidate's Name: Brewster McCracken

Place Running For: 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?**

I live at the Triangle. I have lived there since 2007.

City Life

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

The city – and the mayor in particular - is primarily responsible for recruiting anchor employers. Anchor employers are a critical element in establishing an economic cluster. A city also plays an important leadership role in defining the economic sectors in which a region will pursue job creation.

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?**

The city should establish a Music Department, or in the alternative a Creative Media Department (which could include music, film and digital media). Through the city's new Parking Enterprise, the city could construct dedicated ground floor spaces in new parking garages that could be sound-proofed and targeted for live music venues.

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?**

The art guitars downtown are an excellent example of the transformative role public art makes in the public realm. The city can include and finance art both through fee waivers for placing art in public rights of way and through a dedicated funding category in bed tax-based arts funding for public art projects.

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?**

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Because Sixth Street is both a nightlife district as well as a historic district, it is challenging to change the character of the district. Through a master leasing arrangement similar to Second Street's district-wide master leasing, the Sixth Street PID has the potential to maintain Sixth Street's current nightlife character while also adding new mixes of uses.

- 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?**

I support the Waller Creek project as currently conceived. It will be important to encourage the trailside to be more focused on a greenbelt with running and biking than on a pure Riverwalk type entertainment district.

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?**

Improving access to downtown from areas outside of downtown involves commuter-focused transportation solutions – particularly new commuter rail lines (the Manor-Elgin line and the Austin-San Antonio line) as well as improvements to I-35 and the addition of a managed lane each way on Mopac.

- 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?**

I support planning for and implementation of commuter rail, light rail and rapid bus. I support ROMA's concept for a dedicated lane light rail system running through downtown and connecting downtown to Mueller, UT, the Capitol, the Long Center, E. Riverside and the airport.

- 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?**

The city should improve bicycle commuting facilities by creating a dedicated bikeway for the Lance Armstrong Bikeway, by identifying and creating a corresponding north-south bikeway (through the forthcoming comprehensive plan) and by completing a dedicated bicycle bridge parallel to Mopac over Barton Creek. I was a bicycle commuter for two years but am not currently an active cyclist.

- 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**

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than bicycle projects. Would you support allowing bicyclists to opt for their user fee to go toward bike projects?

No. There is a general principle that citizens should not be able to earmark how their tax dollars are used – this principle exists because otherwise many people would not permit their tax dollars to be used to help the less fortunate.

- 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?**

Lack of funding has hampered widespread implementation of the Great Streets program. I created the parking enterprise in part to establish a new dedicated funding source for rail and pedestrian infrastructure.

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?**

The seminal works on creating great urban parks are Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, William H. Whyte's *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*. The common elements identified in all three books are that the parks should not be too large, should have active uses opening on to them, should have density framing them, should be aesthetically pleasing and should have places to sit.

The most successful urban park in Austin is the park at the Triangle. The forthcoming park next to the Gables project at Cesar Chavez and Lamar will also have the characteristics identified in these books. Each of these parks is publicly funded but will include private maintenance dollars.

- 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?**

It will be critical that political leaders not place a higher priority on pay raises for Austin's powerful public safety unions than on conserving, restoring and improving our parks and fulfilling our commitment to complete the Boardwalk Trail at Lady Bird Lake.

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?**

I do believe that Chief Acevedo has done a good job.

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

I support enforcement of the panhandling ordinance adopted by the City Council in 2005. Also, as William H. Whyte identifies in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, effective ways to improve the quality of life for all people in urban areas include increasing density and greatly improve the amount and aesthetic quality of public spaces.

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?**

I agree with Mayor Wynn's point that downtown's huge outflow of tax payments in one of the public benefits from a vibrant downtown. A vibrant downtown is critical to our quality of life – that is why I sponsored the Downtown Plan and why I supported the recent funding for Phase 2 of the Downtown Plan.

- 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?**

We should stand firm on implementation of the VMU Overlay, resist efforts to roll back zoning for already entitled properties along Lady Bird Lake, promote density and mixed income housing at rail stops, and greatly expand our city's network of neighborhood parks, trails, sidewalks and athletic fields citywide in the 2012 bond election.

- 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?**

In 2012, Austin is scheduled to have a bond election. Past bond elections have focused on large, high profile, expensive projects. And we created some great places. But as I experienced in my own neighborhood when my son Ford was born, we overlooked the small stuff.

I think it's time to turn our attention back to the small stuff... neighborhood sidewalks... small neighborhood parks... trails and bike paths... youth soccer and athletic fields and swimming pools.

I want to do this by focusing the 2012 bond election on quality of life investments in Austin neighborhoods. Instead of three big bond projects, we should do 300 little projects.

For neighborhoods that have neighborhood plans, we should implement the quality of life improvements in those plans. For neighborhoods that don't yet, we will need to spend the next three years planning through the comprehensive plan. The goal would be to ensure that,

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no matter where you live in the city, when you walk out your door, you would see things better in your own neighborhood.

It's the basics – but basics that reflect a vision of what a great American city should be.

- 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?**

As William H. Whyte identifies in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, effective ways to improve the quality of life for all people in urban areas include increasing density and greatly improving the amount and aesthetic quality of public spaces. This applies particularly to the part of downtown where social service providers are concentrated (the central-east area of downtown).

- 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?**

Yes.

- 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?**

This is incredibly fact dependent. As a general rule, apartments are torn down when they have reached a point of significant deterioration. Also, as a general rule, apartments built in the “garden apartment” period of apartment construction have urban design flaws that can contribute to crime and traffic congestion. Apartments are an urban type of development and therefore should be constructed using urbanized urban design. Local examples include the Triangle, the AMLI projects on 2nd Street and the new Simmons Vedder multifamily development at Mueller.

- 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?**

Yes. Whether it will be better in 10 years is the choice facing voters in this election. With the global and local economy undergoing significant transformation, a hunker down approach will cause us to continue to lose jobs and miss out on opportunities. If we move forward now on establishing leadership in the 21st Century Economy sectors of clean energy, biotech and healthcare and the creative economy sectors, including film, digital media and music, Austin can enjoy an even brighter future.