

The Austin Chronicle

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Point Austin: The Campaigns Continue

Catching up with mayor and county judge wannabes

BY [MICHAEL KING](#), FRI., SEPT. 19, 2014

Austin Interfaith caught up with the mayoral and county judge races on Tuesday night, a good occasion for Point Austin to do the same. Although AI is an admirable organization, I've mostly bypassed its "Accountability Sessions," as they traditionally consist of putting the candidates on a simple "Yes/No" record for supporting or opposing AI "issues" – akin to the sort of questions that run like this week's "Will you work with us to keep home ownership affordable ...?" Candidates who answer "No" to such questions probably need to find another line of work.

On Tuesday, there were the usual AI rituals of folk songs, self-congratulation, and cheerleading. But organizers (in AI parlance, "leaders") also called on the three major mayoral candidates (Steve Adler, Sheryl Cole, Mike Martinez) and the Travis County Judge nominees (Sarah Eckhardt, Mike McNamara) to respond to a few open-ended questions about official "public safety" priorities, immigrants rights, housing affordability, and workforce training (Capital IDEA).

Four of the five candidates are progressive Democrats, and their answers were pretty much what you'd expect. They agreed in principle with AI's position that local spending on public safety – narrowly defined as police, fire, and EMS – has become unbalanced against other priorities that should also be considered under the umbrella of "public safety," or as the question elaborated, "education and opportunities for low-income children and adults contribute more to public safety than ever-increasing reliance on law enforcement officers and equipment?"

On that question – how can we "change the culture" that prioritizes enforcement above everything else? – the only pushback was from GOP judicial nominee McNamara, a soft-spoken, grandfatherly fellow, who immediately conjured "gangs, drugs, and shootings" as ironclad reasons why we can't cut back on law enforcement spending. Asked to clarify, he insisted, "We can't detriment our law enforcement to take away from the safety of our children and our neighborhoods."

The S-Comm Shuffle

McNamara responded similarly to Question 2, which asked the candidates to help reduce "incarceration and deportation of immigrants who present no threat to public safety." He said it was a "constitutional issue" over which the county judge has "no authority"; all the others responded that they are doing and will do whatever they can to end the Travis County Sheriff's Secure Communities policy, which involves collaborating with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency in referring all undocumented arrestees for deportation. Mayor Pro Tem Cole and Council Member Martinez pointed to Council's current efforts to create a municipal ID and

to establish a city magistration (booking) facility to short-circuit S-Comm, and Adler agreed, citing the "moral obligation" to protect people who have come to the U.S. in search of work.

Incumbent Judge Sam Biscoe has recently pushed back on the magistration proposal, saying it would mean unnecessary duplication, and Eckhardt proposed a money-saving wrinkle: leasing some portion of the county jail facilities to the city for its magistration, where Sheriff Greg Hamilton's direct authority (and S-Comm enthusiasm) would presumably not reach.

Otherwise, five of the six candidates emphasized education, social services, workforce training, etc., to spend public safety money that does not prioritize law enforcement and incarceration. Those five committed to work to adjust future budget priorities in the same direction.

The Tax Shuffle

On affordable housing, McNamara was again alone in insisting that neither appraisal practices nor commercial vs. residential inequities are to blame for rising housing costs; the only solution, he said, is lowering the property tax rate, either directly or through exemptions. Eckhardt proposed a handful of ideas – county housing projects, co-location with affordable units, a land trust, and legislative pressure – that are variations on projects the city is also trying.

A 20% homestead exemption, advocated by Adler, has become a contentious issue in the mayor's race, with Martinez and Cole (who support a smaller, flat exemption) both insisting it would be a disproportionate gift to wealthy homeowners while increasing pressure on landlords and therefore renters. Adler eloquently defended the idea as (in theory) saving longtime homeowners from losing their homes due to rising rates, although the city percentage in local taxes is relatively low, and as a school finance wonk he certainly knows that our public schools represent the much bigger bite.

On Tuesday, he suggested briefly an interesting variation: that the city take on a significant burden of AISD programs, effectively accepting some of the property tax load from the schools – whence much of it currently returns to the state via recapture – and therefore give taxpayers a bigger bang for their school-tax buck. It's an intriguing proposition – although whether Adler can sufficiently spin the idea so it won't be denounced as simply another city tax hike, remains an open question. "Affordability" comes in many disguises.