

# AUSTIN MONITOR



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**ELECTIONS**

## **Austin Interfaith grills mayoral candidates on affordability**

Only three of the eight candidates in the running for mayor participated in a question-and-answer session hosted by Austin Interfaith on Tuesday. And rather than give candidates a forum to lay out their individual platforms, Austin Interfaith directed four specific questions to them about the group's priorities, touching on education, immigration, affordable homes and employment.

To preface the questions, members of the interfaith community told personal stories about each issue. Thirteen-year-old Alan Gonzalez told the audience that at age 9, his father was arrested and detained for a minor traffic violation because he could not present a valid ID to police.

"I felt scared and worried I might not see my dad again," he said. Gonzalez said his family and friends should not have to live in fear of deportation, and the city should implement municipal IDs that immigrant residents can show police when they are stopped for minor violations.

Mayor Pro Tem Sheryl Cole said Austin's practice of sharing information on detainees with Immigrations and Custom Enforcement is "morally wrong" and that she co-sponsored a resolution to change the policy. As an alternative, she said, the city could stop placing detainees in the county jail and instead hire a magistrate to deal with detainees locally.

Cole also said she supports municipal IDs. As it stands, she said, many immigrant residents are unable to obtain jobs or open bank accounts, which leads to predatory lending practices.

“That resolution is in the works,” Cole said.

Council Member Mike Martinez said the city gives the county jail \$6 million a year. He said the city could simply pull the funding and use it to hire a magistrate so deportation would not be an issue.

Attorney Steve Adler said a large portion of the detainees are nonviolent offenders, and Austin’s program with ICE should stop.

“That rips apart families,” he said.

As mayor, Adler added, he would explore an alternate booking facility and support municipal IDs.

Austin Independent School District Interim Superintendent Paul Cruz said of the district’s 85,000 students, 62 percent live in poverty. Carlota Garcia of Austin Interfaith said 70 percent of the city’s general fund goes to public safety, including military-grade SWAT team vehicles and multimillion-dollar helicopters. She said some of the money would be better spent on education opportunities for low-income children and adults.

Adler, who served as chief of staff and general counsel for state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh (D-EI Paso), said 75 percent of people incarcerated are high school dropouts. The city must make education a priority, he said.

If elected, Adler said he would staff an education outreach coordinator to find ways to access more funding for education.

Cole said she started her career in the public sector as president of the Parent Teacher Association, and if elected, she would work with AISD, Austin Interfaith and other groups to put an emphasis on education.

Martinez said City Council has worked to “hold the line” on public safety spending over the past three years, giving minimal or no pay raises to employees in this department.

“I will continue to do what we’re doing at City Hall,” he said.

Shannon Jones, a mother and resident of Rosewood Courts public housing, said her apartment does not have air conditioning, which makes it difficult for her and her son to sleep at night.

“Too many landlords don’t care about their tenants,” she said.

To make the city more affordable, all the mayoral candidates agreed the city should establish a 20 percent homestead exemption.

Martinez said he would also work to fund organizations like the East Austin Conservancy, which helps homeowners protest housing appraisals to lower their property tax rate.

He added, "We have to fight for higher wages."

Adler said, besides a homestead exemption, city government should focus on bringing middle-class jobs to Austin.

"We have an affordability crisis in this city," he said. "People are losing their homes because they can't pay the taxes."

Cole said Council Member Kathie Tovo enacted a \$5,000 property tax exemption, which Cole supported. She said the legislature does not allow a higher flat-fee exemption, but, if elected mayor, she would petition the legislature to raise the allowance.

Cole also said she sponsored a "source of income" resolution that prohibits apartment owners from discriminating against Section 8 tenants.

Marisela Carcamo, a recent graduate of Austin Community College, said she has the Capital IDEA program to thank, which helps low-income residents apply and pay for college. Carcamo said before she contacted Capital IDEA, she was a high school dropout and teenage mother, struggling to get by. After earning an associate degree in nursing, her pay jumped to \$25 an hour, she said.

Martinez said, if elected, he would work to double funding for Capital IDEA and other social service contracts.

Cole agreed, adding that companies that set up shop in the city should either help fund programs like Capital IDEA or offer internships to participants.

Adler said, if elected mayor, he would set a community agenda that promotes education and job creation.

Candidates Ronald Culver, a retired electrical engineer; investor Mary Krenek; retired tech worker David Orshalick; aircraft mechanic and Web entrepreneur Randall Stephens; and business owner Todd Phelps did not attend the event.

- See more at: <http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2014/09/austin-interfaith-grills-mayoral-candidates-affordability/#sthash.CCnHAV2L.dpuf>