

# Austin American-Statesman

## Wack, Freedman: Change budget priorities to promote economic equality

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By The Rev. Bill Wack and Rabbi Alan Freedman - Austin Interfaith

*“When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programs or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.”*  
— Pope Francis, *Gospel of Joy*

The crafting of budgets is an essential activity undertaken by local governments this time of year. These budgets are moral documents — statements of our community values. These are neither left-leaning nor right-leaning values. Where we spend our collective resources reflects what matters most to all residents of Austin and Travis County.

It is troubling that despite the fact that almost three in 10 Austin-area children subsisting below the federal poverty line, and despite the city of Austin having at its disposal more funds this year than last year, no significant new investment is planned to address missing resources to lift children and families out of poverty.

Leaders of Austin Interfaith, an organization of 37 congregations, schools, unions, tenant associations and nonprofits, examined the city of Austin budget this spring through dozens of large and small group meetings. Present at our budget sessions were wide cross-sections of parents of small children, young singles still finding their economic footing, seniors concerned about their future and that of their grandchildren, immigrants, labor leaders and environmental folks from institutions both religious and secular.

People were astonished to learn that almost 70 percent of Austin’s general fund budget is dedicated each year to public safety — police, fire and EMS. In contrast, less than 1 percent is spent on early childhood development. We recognize the critical importance of appropriate funding for public safety, but public safety is only one of multiple critical needs that affect the quality of life and future of all of our residents.

Our parks programs are underfunded. Neighborhood pools open late in the spring and close as early as August. Social service contracts have not matched the growth in our population and need to address such things as unacceptable infant mortality rates. Our investment in libraries in neighborhoods experiencing poverty does not match those in more affluent areas. Our affordable housing supply is inadequate. Some full-time city employees cannot afford to live here.

Unless addressed, this reality will perpetuate the same economic segregation that Mayor Steve Adler publicly deplored — not to mention the perpetuation of racial segregation. No annual increase in the public safety budget can redress our economic inequality.

Austin Interfaith calls for a larger share of the budget to be invested in home affordability, Capital IDEA (a workforce development that helps adults lift themselves out of poverty) and programs that enhance children’s learning —such as after-school tutoring, libraries with bilingual books and staff, park and recreation programs, summer youth job opportunities and more. We also call for better pay for low-wage city and county employees.

Just as Pope Francis has called for an economy of inclusion, we as a city must change the city’s budget priorities to promote economic equality and lift children out of poverty. If you want Austin’s budget to reflect these priorities, please communicate so to your council members.

Wack is pastor of St. Ignatius Martyr Catholic Church; Freedman is senior rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom.