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Torchy's bid for alcohol permit takes a hit from officials, faith group

James Barragan, Community, philanthropy reporter/Austin American Statesman
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The grassroots political organization [Austin Interfaith](#) flexed its muscles Wednesday night, pushing three elected officials to declare their support for renewed funding for programs at Travis Heights Elementary and their opposition to an alcohol permit for Torchy's Tacos on South Congress, which sits across the street from Fulmore Middle School.

The group also got commitments from Mayor Pro Tem Kathie Tovo and Austin school board trustees Paul Saldaña and Jayme Mathias to help minimize the displacement of families if a South Austin affordable housing complex called The Heights is redeveloped. The complex's owner, Doug Gurkin, also agreed to work with the group toward that goal.

"We got commitments from our guests tonight. That's an important step," said Raymond Sinatra, a leader with Austin Interfaith. "But we still need to get a lot done."



RALPH BARRERA / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Travis Heights Elementary. Austin Interfaith sought commitment from city officials Wednesday night to help increase funding for programming at the Central Austin in-district charter school.

Austin Interfaith regularly holds events like the one Wednesday night to let its members know where elected officials stand on the issues the group advocates for. In front of an assembly of 200 people at Travis Heights Elementary, the group asked its invited officials to commit to increasing funding for parent support specialists, "Prime Time" after-school programs and a tutorial program at the school.

“I’m proud to say I have been leading the efforts with (Austin school board) trustee (Gina) Hinojosa to do this,” Saldaña said.

The meeting also pushed the officials on an application from Torchy’s Tacos to waive a city ordinance that prohibits the sale of alcohol within 300 feet of a school. The restaurant’s South Congress location, which [formerly housed Fran’s Hamburgers](#) and sits across the street from Fulmore Middle School, has filed an application with the city that would allow it to sell alcohol.

The Austin school district and other stakeholders fear that alcohol sales across the street from the school would be a negative influence on kids at an impressionable age.

Torchy’s had originally pulled their request to serve alcohol in 2014, after opposition from local stakeholders. But this year, the restaurant decided to renew its waiver application. The item was scheduled to go to City Council on Thursday, but Torchy’s has asked to postpone the hearing.

In a written statement on Wednesday, Torchy’s said all its locations are committed to being good neighbors and asked for the postponement to work with area stakeholders on potential compromises.

“The South Congress Flagship has a lot of measures in place to ensure that alcohol sales at this location do not negatively impact anyone, most importantly underage patrons,” the statement read. “Among the many commitments we have made, an important one is to perform an IDScan for every alcohol sale. This will verify legal drinking age with no question.”

Torchy’s said it has over 2,800 signatures of support from neighbors and customers. Austin Interfaith, the Austin school district and nearby neighborhood associations are opposed to the waiver and are also against delaying the hearing.

“Our community has been fighting this thing for two years,” said Brian Ferguson, a minister of the Wildflower Church and a leader with Austin Interfaith. “We cannot keep this over our heads.”

Council Member Sabino “Pio” Renteria was not at the meeting but sent in written answers to the group’s questions. He did not commit to the group’s goals of stepping up funding for academic programs at the school because this year’s city budget will have very little wiggle room, he wrote, but he did sign on to the other two requests.

Correction: This story has been updated to correct the day of the meeting. It was Wednesday night.