

**Place 5 Race**  
**Candidate Questionnaire Response**

**Bill Spelman**

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# Responses from Bill Spelman

## Better Austin Today - May 2009 Election

### CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

#### ENVIRONMENT

**1. Postponing the construction of the \$500 million “Water Treatment Plant #4” for at least three years**

*If elected to City Council, will you support the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, Clean Water Action, Save Our Springs Alliance and others by voting to postpone construction of the \$500 million “Water Treatment Plant #4” for at least three years while the City focuses efforts on water conservation and reuse and comprehensive planning? This would include expenditures for site preparation.*

*I believe it would be reasonable to postpone construction of Water Treatment Plant #4 considering our city’s difficult financial position, the success of the water conservation program, and opportunity for the comprehensive planning process to help redefine future growth patterns. The extremely high cost of this proposed plant requires a more prudent fiscal approach than we have seen to date.*

**2. Protecting East Austin from the dumping of trash and toxic waste**

Many in the Austin community have championed environmental causes, yet the areas to the east have been and are continuing to be dumping grounds for trash and waste not only from Travis county but surrounding areas. If you are elected to the City Council, will you set as a priority ensuring a safe and healthy quality of life especially for those in East Austin by working with all citizens and city staff to learn about threats and to ensure better protection of all citizens.

*Yes, we need to reduce environmental threats across the city and make sure the things we can’t remove are distributed equitably. One way to do this is by creating a set of neighborhood indicators that will benchmark environmental hazards in the city.*

- 3. Eliminating environmentally destructive and hazardous energy sources**  
What measures would you take to help the City of Austin phase out coal as an energy option? Are you willing to commit to not only no further ownership investment in the South Texas Nuclear Project but also not enter into future power purchase contracts from the STNP?

*I do not support further ownership investment in the STNP. Despite Austin's reputation as a green utility, the fact remains that the great majority of our base load power generation is produced from coal, gas, and the nuke. Unfortunately, there is not a clear idea of how Austin could move completely away from fossil fuels. I eagerly await the results of several studies currently underway to determine how to transform Austin into a primarily green utility. Until that time I will continue to strongly support wind, solar, and further conservation efforts.*

**4. Protecting the Barton Creek Watershed**

If you are elected to the City Council, will you vote to oppose upzonings (increase in density and environmental impacts) in the Barton Springs water shed? Will you also oppose debt financing of toll roads in the city's Drinking Water Protection Zone that would encourage sprawl in the Hill Country and Edwards Aquifer recharge zone?

*Protection of Barton Springs and the Aquifer by limiting density is a long-held value in our community that should be a factor in public decisions in the area. On principle I do not support increases in density over the aquifer but I also understand that there may be a rare case in which additional density result in greater protection for the springs than the present use. The way to be sure that this is an appropriate decision is to measure the volume and quality entering the aquifer in the current and proposed use. Under no circumstance would I support a change unless it's a clear improvement on volume and quality.*

*I have had a longstanding position that the debt financed toll road plan is poorly conceived and could result in substantial additional public debt in the future. We need to determine how to provide mobility for area residents that does not rely on toll roads.*

## GENERAL

### **1. Honoring maximum height limits established in the 1986 Waterfront Overlay District**

The Waterfront Overlay Task Force appointed by the City Council has recommended that the maximum height limits that were in the 1986 Waterfront Overlay ordinance, omitted in the 1999 “plain English” re-write of the land development code, be reinstated. Will you, if you are elected to the City Council, support reinstating these height limits in the Waterfront Overlay District and oppose any project **now in the pipeline** that would violate the intent of the 1986 ordinance?

*I have supported efforts to reestablish and respect the 1986 Ordinance and commend the community effort on its successful effort to get the city to respect the Overlay. I will support the 1986 height limits but I need more information as to whether any projects going forward at this time violate the 1986 Overlay.*

### **2. Ensuring community involvement in the Comprehensive Planning process:**

The City is about to hire a consultant to help in the development of the new comprehensive plan. However, there has been almost no community involvement in establishing the process and extent of community input that the planning process will use. If elected to the City Council, would you support establishing a community advisory committee, much as was used in developing the 1979 Comprehensive Plan, that includes a full range of community interests including neighborhood, environmental, local and small business, and social equity advocates?

*I strongly support the establishment of a community advisory committee for the proposed comprehensive plan and all other major planning efforts. It is a basic component of successful participatory planning and should have been created from the inception of the project. Improving public participation across the city government is a major tenet of my campaign*

*and it will be a priority during my term of office.*

**3. Alleviating the increasing economic burden of middle and low income community residents:**

The cost of living continues to climb in our community and Austin is no longer seen as an affordable city for most people in the middle and lower income brackets. Property Taxes are a major factor in the escalating financial burden. While we are facing a financially difficult time, we need to address this problem now and therefore would you be willing to sponsor and actively support a homestead exemption for the City of Austin's portion of our property tax? If not what do you propose to do to reduce the growing economic burden on the middle and lower income residents of our community?

*Overlapping tax jurisdictions and increased valuations are a major reason property taxes have increased over the last decade. Austin is the only local government without a homestead exemption and I support creating one in concept. Before we do so, however, we need to undertake a thorough analysis of the resulting benefits and costs. I believe the homestead exemption proposal should be reviewed as a part of an overall study of affordability in Austin, which would include housing, transportation, childcare, food, and utilities along with taxes and land use.*

**OPEN GOVERNMENT**

**1. Community participation in budget planning:**

If you are elected to the City Council, will you support opening up the City budget process to allow for more community input into establishing budget priorities and support the ability of the City Council to set budget priorities and move funding between the various departments and programs to reflect the community's priorities?

*Bringing best practices in participatory budgeting to Austin is part of my public participation program that I intend to bring to the City Council.*

**2. Establishing clear lines of authority and accountability of COA staff and elected and appointed officials**

It is the experience of many Austin stakeholders that COA staff, across all departments, too often make changes to ordinances, regulations, and procedures at administrative decision levels, thus circumventing due legal process and public oversight of those changes. Do you agree with this statement, and if elected to the

City Council, will you make it a priority to establish clear and transparent roles for elected/appointed officials and especially COA staff, and work to eliminate the de facto policy-making habits of COA staff?

*Addressing this problem at the City of Austin will require a major commitment by the city and the community. The lack of clear lines of communication and responsibility to public has led to uneven implementation of city policies and ordinances. I propose a complete review of city public participation policies which should reveal the problems and create a clear structure to find solutions.*

**3. Involvement of Boards and Commissions with City Council decision-making:**

The increase use of City Council sub-committees is viewed by many as an attempt to bypass the expertise of Board and Commission members. If elected to the City Council, will you make a commitment to reduce the number of Council subcommittees that duplicate Boards and Commissions, respond to the recommendations in the Austin Chronicle article that addresses Boards and Commissions efficiency, and re-integrate City Boards and Commissions in the decision-making process?

*As Chair of the Boards and Commissions Task Force and primary author of its final report, I agree that the Boards and Commission have a vital role to play in bring the community into City Hall. I agree with the recommendations in the Austin Chronicle article and will work to ensure that the work of Boards and Commission is taken seriously on the dais.*

## NEIGHBORHOOD

**1. Honoring valid petitions:**

Valid petitions are one of the most important means that neighborhoods have to prevent inappropriate and intrusive zoning changes. Would you support a neighborhood's valid petition on a zoning case in all cases (with the possible exception of where public safety is concerned)?

*I have actively supported efforts to protect my neighborhood from inappropriate development. I strongly believe in the right of neighborhoods to use valid petitions. While I would support them in almost every case, I cannot say in all cases because I cannot anticipate every potential situation which could arise in the future.*

**2. Honoring zoning established in neighborhood plans:**

Neighborhood Planning was supposed to help alleviate conflicts between neighborhoods and developers by defining what was and was not acceptable development in the neighborhood, and as such was a balanced compromise between competing interests. However, too often after a Neighborhood Plan is adopted by City Council, and almost before the ink is dry, there are requests to approve zoning changes that are in conflict with the adopted plans. And often these requests are looked at by staff and the boards and commissions in isolation and not in the context of the overall compromises already reached during the planning process. As a City Council member, would you pledge to oppose any change of zoning that is conflict with an adopted plan unless the plan implementation or contact team supports it?

*I understand that neighborhood plans were created after hours and hours of work by residents. I will find the views of the contact team on any proposed change to be very persuasive.*

**Establishing growth capacity in the Comprehensive Planning process:**

The City is embarking on developing a new Comprehensive Plan. Do you believe we should examine the issue of what is the capacity of our current public infrastructure and available resources, in particularly water resources, with regard to how we manage future growth of our city?

*Moving to a more sustainable regional approach will take a major transition of culture and leadership. Capacity planning is a basic part of building a sustainable model and I support building on the existing work through the Comprehensive Plan.*

## LOCALLY OWNED BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HEALTH

**1. Keeping our hard earned dollars from exiting the community by stimulating local business opportunities.**

Billions of dollars leave the Austin economy each year to buy goods and services that could eventually be produced locally. If elected to the City Council, will you authorize a comprehensive study to detail these opportunities to grow our local businesses?

*In my campaign, I have said that a strong economy begins at home. That means focusing city resources on those parts of our economy that create jobs and provide new opportunities for the future. I would gladly support a city/community study on developing small business opportunities.*

**2. Committing to locally owned financial institutions for City of Austin banking relationships**

The City of Austin's depository agreement (banking relationship), which includes deposits held, is with Bank of America. If elected to the City Council, will you direct the city manager to favor locally owned financial institutions like credit unions, small thrifts, and small commercial banks?

*My fiduciary duty to the City is to protect public funds and maximize the return on public dollars. Some of that return is in the form of dollars but some of it could well be in support for locally owned business and the economy as a whole.*

**3. Directing the City of Austin Economic Growth and Redevelopment Services Office to focus on local businesses.**

If elected to the City Council, will you direct the City Manager to instruct the Economic Growth and Redevelopment Services Office to concentrate its Business Retention and Expansion program to concentrate its efforts on locally owned businesses which, dollar for dollar, provide far greater economic and cultural impact for the city?

*Yes, over the last ten years the vast majority of new jobs created nationwide have been created by small businesses. Nevertheless, some strategically valuable*

*investments (such as MCC or Sematech) have historically helped to fuel small business creation and growth locally.*

## **SOCIAL EQUITY**

**1. Ensuring that APD prioritizes and focuses on felony crimes over low-level misdemeanors.**

The Austin Police Department spends significant resources on arrests and booking of misdemeanor crimes that could be dealt with through a citation process thus saving funds that either could be reallocated to more serious felony crimes or could result in having these funds available for other city priorities. If elected would you support a City Council resolution directing the City Manager and Chief of Police to vigorously implement the citation process for misdemeanor crimes and redirect those freed up funds to other city priorities?

*Yes.*

**2. Supporting equal distribution of locally undesirable land uses (LULUS) versus encouraging concentration of such uses in “cheap dirt” areas with already deteriorating “quality of life.”**

Often undesirable land uses, such as land fills, maintenance and industrial facilities are located in areas with lower land costs and these areas tend to be in lower income or in predominately minority neighborhoods, especially East Austin. If elected to the City Council will you support calling for the City Manager to direct City Staff to review the location of existing LULU's within our whole community and develop future LULU placement criteria that prioritizes the impact on the adjacent community instead of the relying solely on the cost of land to determine appropriate locations for LULU's?

*It is not clear that the cost of the land is the sole consideration that has led to lower income parts of our community having to suffer from a disproportionate share of LULUs. I would support a review of undesirable land uses and the development of future placement criteria. This would be another natural fit for the comprehensive plan process and the neighborhood indicators project which I have proposed.*

**3. Maintaining city services to low and moderate income Austin citizens during economic downturns and proposed across the board city budget cuts.**

In anticipation of a \$25 million shortfall during the fiscal year (2008-09 budget), if elected to the City Council, would you assure that any proposals you consider and support for budget cuts would not result in the elimination or reduction in funding for the most needy, underserved and poor in our community?

*Budget shortfalls will be a great challenge for the next several years. In a time of declining revenue, our community's needs will increase. I will ensure that every neighborhood has an equitable distribution of the city services it needs most and I will be proposing a number of ways to leverage existing resources to expand or maintain services during these difficult economic times.*