



2020 General Election Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate: Vanessa Fuentes

Office Seeking: Austin City Council District 2

Political Affiliation: Democratic Party

Candidate's Website: www.VanessaForAustin.com

Why are you running for this position?

Austin is the tale of two cities. We are one of the most economically segregated cities in the county, our schools rank as one of the most racially segregated in the state, and our land development code keeps Austin as divided today as it was a century ago. I'm running to bring a community voice to Austin City Council and to champion equity for working families of District 2. I want to bridge the health divide that our community faces. With housing costs on the rise and gentrification rapidly accelerating, I also want to ensure that Austinites are able to put roots down, and that our most tenured Austinites can continue to call our city home.

What do you believe are the three most critical issues facing the City of Austin, and why?

Health Equity – Nearly 30% of District 2 are uninsured. Several areas of District 2 are classified as food deserts. Lack of healthcare access and limited access to healthy food are just a few of the issues that my community faces. I plan to advocate for the addition of community health navigators (FTEs) focused on serving disparate populations so that our neighbors in need can access resources and provide the information needed. I also plan to advocate for the establishment of a healthy food financing initiative to help spur the development of grocery stores or co-ops to help address food insecurity.

Community Engagement – I want to let the people in. We've had several big issues confront our community in the last few years including school closures and a comprehensive update to the land development code. These big issues fundamentally change how our communities are shaped and connected. My neighbors in Southeast Austin feel left out of the process. They feel that they are being ignored and dismissed. I want to bring the community's voice to City Hall and reshape how the City makes decisions that impact our daily lives. I will accomplish this by championing 21st community engagement practices including virtual testimony from anywhere in the city, childcare availability at city hall during city council meetings, electronic polling of the district on council agenda items, and make it easier to follow along with City Council proceedings. I'd also like to host town halls (albeit virtually for now), bringing city experts to a part of the city they don't normally go to. It's time that the City comes to the people.

Financial Stability – The coronavirus pandemic has also dealt an economic blow to our community. City Council will be tasked to balance priorities and social services with a limited budget due to the loss of

economic revenue (sales tax, hotel tax, alcohol sales tax, etc.). It's important that we remain vigilant to ensure that the budget isn't balanced on the backs of hardworking Austinites. I want to ensure that our most vulnerable populations have the necessary resources needed to make ends meet. We can do this by providing direct financial assistance to those in need, offering grants to small businesses and nonprofits, and partnering with organizations to ensure a stable safety net.

If elected, what other items would you like to accomplish while in office?

I'd like to focus on the fundamentals of what keeps our growing city growing and connected. We need significant investments in our infrastructure. We need to proactively plan for growth to ensure that it is sustainable and equitable. It's important that we have a strong quality of life for ALL Austinites. This includes communities with complete streets, connected sidewalks, parks within walking distance, quality water, and accessible grocery stores. Your zip code should not determine your life outcome.

How would you describe your position as it relates to balancing the needs of new job creation and big development projects, with the big problems of traffic congestion, cost of living, and affordability?

My goal will always be to carefully balance the needs and priorities of this city. I hope to be a council member that can help bridge the space between these issues that some in this city see as competing. I support job creation in this city, and I also believe that we need to ensure that all Austinites benefit from developments. The tax dollars that new jobs bring and the economic impact from new projects are one way for us to fully invest in a functioning transportation network and affordable housing.

Do you believe that our Land Development Code needs to be updated?

Yes

If you answered "Yes" to question #13, what would you want to see updated in our land development code?

We must update our land development code to reflect Austin's present and future. Our city is not what it was in 1983 (the last time we updated the code), and we cannot continue land use policies as if nothing has changed. Austin's current land development code is 30 years old and was written in a time when the population of this city was half the size it is today. Saying this, I believe we have not yet found a real middle ground between supporting our city's population growth by creating housing and ensuring that current residents have a place in the Austin of tomorrow. I support transit-oriented development that includes increased density on major corridors, particularly in areas where we have the necessary infrastructure to sustain development. I also support the equity overlay to help protect our residents at risk of displacement. Small businesses like low-income Austinites can be heavily impacted by gentrification and increasing rents so we have to be careful who we displace as we update our land development code. Land banks and community land trusts are two important tools that can help us create affordability.

If you answered "No" to question #13, what do you like about our existing code?

One of RECA's top areas of focus has been to improve the overall permitting process to make it more predictable for everyone. Please indicate any specific policies you have worked on (or will work on) while in office related to improving efficiencies in the permitting process.

If I am elected to Austin City Council, I will champion the streamlining of permits. Affordability is an ever-growing problem in our city, and permitting adds costs to every development or redevelopment in our city. I am the only candidate in my race with plans on my website to help small businesses and one of those plans deals with permitting. The plan reads, "Businesses and residents alike find it difficult to navigate the City of Austin permitting system. We can draw upon best practices to streamline the system, bringing in increased revenue and better serve our business community and residents. We should also explore reducing or eliminating permitting fees amid the pandemic."

What specific policies would you support to address our severe housing shortage and the rising cost to construct and produce housing?

The City of Austin is currently facing one of the most severe affordable housing crises in history. Not surprisingly, those living in poverty are the most significantly affected. The supply of low-cost housing has shrunk, rents have continued to rise, all while lower-income Austinites have experienced slow or stagnant wage growth. Too many Austinites spend at least half of their income toward housing, putting them at risk of housing instability and homelessness. We should prioritize the use of City-owned land for the development of affordable housing with permanent affordability restrictions. I support the establishment of a community land trust operated by the City of Austin or in partnership with Travis County with the purpose of expanding affordable, income-restricted housing. I support the creation of a Neighborhood Stabilization Loan Program to assist vulnerable low-income homeowners to provide long-term, low-interest loans. This will be targeted to low-income homeowners who are paying for more than 30 percent of their income on housing. The loans could be forgivable in exchange for the homeowner agreeing to a longer-term affordability restriction, ensuring that the home would be sold to another low-income owner and remain owner-occupied. I firmly believe the City should establish a one-stop-shop division to integrate all assistance programs into one centralized database to ensure efficiency and simplify processes. This would allow for a targeted outreach program to ensure that seniors, low-income homeowners, long-time homeowners and disabled homeowners in neighborhoods experiencing displacement are taking full advantage of all available resources and programs, including available exemptions and rebates relating to taxes and utilities.

What is your position on Project Connect?

I support Project Connect

What other measures would you support to improve current and future mobility throughout our city?

Transportation costs are increasing as Austinites spend more and more time in traffic. I am supportive of Project Connect, though I wish there were more in it that would benefit the District 2 community. Austin is one of the largest cities in the nation with such an underbuilt mass transit system. We have to do something now to plan for the projected level of growth proactively, combat climate change, and provide an affordable, safer transportation option to help improve affordability in Austin. I'd like to see a bus yard stationed south of the river, and will be actively advocating for it as it will help us ensure reliable and consistent bus service for South Austinites. Additionally, Prop A contains a significant investment in anti-displacement efforts. If passed this would be the largest investment our city has ever made to help prevent displacement. Also, I support the full funding and implementation of the Sidewalk Plan, Urban Trails Plan, and Vision Zero plan.

Do you support the expansion and improvement of major roadways and highways in our region, such as IH-35, US 183, and 360?

Yes

How do you think RECA or the business community should play a productive role in our city?

RECA and the business community are an important partner in the future growth of our city. When I am making decisions on the city council dais, I will look to groups like RECA to help ensure I am fully informed on decisions.