

2008 Austin City Council AHLA Candidate Forum, March 2008

- a. What is your position on pricing flexibility at the Austin Convention Center in order to be able to compete with other cities that provide low cost or no cost meeting space to attract large conventions?

Ensuring that the Convention Center is competitive for group and convention business may sometimes require flexible pricing especially during off-peak periods. It is my understanding that the new Convention Center Director Mark Tester has developed a stronger and more cooperative relationship between the Austin hoteliers, the CVB, and the Convention Center operations. I applaud this proactive new approach and would want to give the Convention Center and the CVB the tools that they need to better compete with other cities, particularly those that run their convention centers as loss leaders. Flexibility does not mean giving away the shop to get business. To me it means using all available tools to increase the overall size of the pie.

- b. What is your position on working to increase the level of hotel tax funding that is dedicated to the CVB for promoting tourism and hotel and convention activity?

The percentage of every hotel occupancy tax dollar that the ACVB receives is one of the lowest in the State. Austin isn't spending as much as comparable cities spend to promote convention business. This makes us more likely to lose out on the state and national level as San Antonio, Dallas and Houston have CVB budgets that are double or even triple Austin's. Yet, we spend the highest percentage of our hotel tax funding on our Convention Center. I support re-examining the formula we are currently using to make sure that we don't just "build it and assume they will come."

- c. What is your position on the use of City Hotel Occupancy Tax for community events or programs that have no direct impact on tourism and the hotel and convention industry?

State law requires that the local hotel occupancy tax be used to support tourism and the hotel and convention industry and the City must of course ensure that state law is followed. That being said, it is incumbent on City staff and the CVB to do more to educate hotel tax funded entities on how to ensure that their hotel tax funded programs and/or events directly promote tourism and potential hotel activity, so we can increase the impact of their events, and in turn increase the economic activity and hotel tax funding that is generated. The more hotel tax that is generated, translates to more available funding to promote tourism, hotel activity, and the promotion of the arts and historical restoration to the benefit of everyone.

- d. If you were suggesting enhancements or changes to the City's Plan for Downtown Development, what would be the key components?

I support AHLA's position and the majority of the recommendations of the Downtown Austin Association on the City's Plan for Downtown Development. Specifically, I would focus on enhancing public safety support and improving sidewalks, and therefore the walkability and "bike-ability" of these vital tourism and citizen pathways. I would also promote more green building and greater attention to historic preservation.

- e. What is your vision and position on the development of Waller Creek and how would you get it done?

This is a project that has already taken too long to complete. The bonds for Waller Creek were approved long ago, so I share AHLA's sense of urgency and will support public/private partnerships to encourage investment that takes us beyond the infrastructure phase and into the reality of having a place for work and play. The Waller Creek tunnel project offers a vital economic development opportunity for not only the east side of downtown as well as for near east Austin, it will benefit all of Austin, the tourism industry, and the citizens at large. Waller Creek is a critical part of downtown development, impacting both residents and tourists. With the tunnel complete and the floodplain mitigated, I hope to see additional new development happen adjacent to and nearby Waller Creek that is in keeping with the character and culture of Austin and that contributes in a positive, sustainable way to our economy and community

- f. What would be your suggestions related to the City's role in addressing the ever growing homeless population?

First, I would explore expanding rehabilitative housing and other services to help people get back on their feet. We've got to do more to leverage the strengths of our local nonprofits, and help them better address these challenges. I plan to build on my extensive experience in the nonprofit sector to improve the way the City does business with basic needs providers. I will also work hard to create new resources by bringing private sector partners to the table, and I will actively pursue additional sources of federal funding that will likely become available with the upcoming change in White House administrations. Austin must not only get its "fair share" of those funds, it should hopefully get even *more* - by competing as successfully on that front as we do on so many others. Part of the equation to effectively address the issue of homelessness, we've got to expand services for mental illness and substance abuse.

- g. Would you be amenable to considering relocation and/or a land swap of the existing ARCH and Salvation Army Downtown facilities if it is found that this would be vital to the growth and development of a Waller Creek and downtown business development district?

When it comes to ideas like this one, it is imperative to have all the stakeholders at the table first. Moving a facility that isn't even 4 years old (the ARCH) may not be an

efficient use of resources. But an issue like this can not effectively be addressed in a hypothetical. We would need to look at all the circumstances, costs, and benefits of any proposal put on the table in this regard.

- h. What would you suggest as a strategy to further develop our airport and increase direct flights into Austin and would that strategy include the potential use of incentives?

With rising fuel costs, direct flights are a key component to keeping travel costs down. I'm proud that our airport now boasts 54 direct flights every day, including recently-added destinations like Philadelphia, Mexico City and Toronto. Keeping Austin a desirable place to visit and do business is critical to attracting more direct flights, but we also must increase our focus on the fact that our airport is already operating at near maximum capacity with respect to gate commitments. In May, the new "low cost" terminal will open for its first flight with at least three new gates. Viva Aerobus will be its first occupant with direct flights to and from Mexico to Austin. The Airport will be coming back to the City Council in the next few months with proposals for further expansion, with proposals that would offer up to nine additional new gates into the Airport. It is vital that we support the viability and growth of our airport as is dictated by the economic indicators – in a word the demand. Austin is an "O&D" airport, meaning 98 percent of its traffic involves originations and destinations that begin or end in Austin. Only two percent of the current airport traffic involves using Austin as a transfer location for individuals flying through Austin. Economically, this means that unlike a HUB airport such as DFW that handles a good percentage of airport transfers, Austin's potential growth in flights is directly dependent on the growth in demand for airline routes that originate from or have a destination of Austin. Incentives could certainly be considered, but ultimately, we need to ensure a strong public private partnership with the airlines that shows them that we are ready to support and service their growth so that our supply of gates is sufficient to meet our demand.

- i. What would be your top suggestions to address our current transportation issues including vehicular and pedestrian path and traffic routes?

Easing vehicular traffic downtown begins with having more transportation options city-wide through HOV lanes, rail lines and efficient bus options. I support AHLA's position on this issue and would also advocate for more efficient and more user-friendly Cap Metro and Dillo routing, as well as for improved sidewalks and bike lanes. We also need to explore ways to better collaborate with the State and University, as well as with other large employers who are our biggest traffic generators to see if there are ways to "stage" arrivals and departures to change the traffic patterns so we can use our existing transportation capacity more efficiently.