

2018 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name	Bobby Levinski
What's your favorite park in Austin? Why?	Zilker Park (incl. Barton Springs pool) is Austin's urban oasis. When I try to describe Austin to people who aren't familiar with our city, the image of standing in the middle of the great lawn surrounded by families enjoying life outdoors comes to mind. Unfortunately, the space is often overused, and as our city continues to grow, we need to invest in other spaces around time that can provide a similar feel and function for families.
Ensuring equitable access to quality parks for all Austinites is a key priority for Austin Parks Foundation. How might you work as a decision-maker for both your district and the city as a whole to move the needle on equitable access to quality parks?	<p>In 2009, as a policy advisor to Council Member Laura Morrison, I helped draft the official city policy goal to provide publicly-accessible and child-friendly parks within at least a ½-mile walking distance for all Austin residents. To fill the gaps around town, we must be willing to dedicate the necessary resources for the acquisition and improvement of public parkland.</p> <p>Southwest Austin is on those areas that lack adequate access to public parkland, which is why I advocated that the Bond Election Advisory Task Force include funding for a regional park in Oak Hill within the upcoming 2018 city bond package. I am also very supportive of identifying funding to complete the master plan for the Walter E. Long Metropolitan Park, which has sat for far too long, undervalued.</p> <p>To help fund the parks we need, new developments should help offset the increased demands on our public parks that they cause. I support maintaining a strong parkland dedication ordinance and, in 2015, advocated to increase the fees that developers are required to pay when building new housing and hotels.</p> <p>But, building new parks is not enough. We must also protect and enhance the parks that we already have, which is why I helped organize opposition to the recent proposal to give away parkland along Lady Bird Lake to a private enterprise. I have also helped promote the installation of interactive playscapes at City parks and have helped identify funding for parks maintenance positions.</p>

The City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department faces \$125 million in deferred maintenance each year, ranging from playground maintenance and aquatics needs to mowing and servicing trash and recycling receptacles. What would be your strategy for addressing this need?

Identifying funding for parkland maintenance and fixing our pools have always been top priorities for me in helping balance the budget throughout my service as a council aide. Because parks are often hit the hardest during the bad years, I have worked to restore funds for maintenance during better financial forecasts (such as adding 2 FTEs for maintenance in FY15). Relying solely on general fund revenue is extremely volatile, which is why it is so important that we maintain a strong parkland dedication ordinance to require developers of new projects to help pay for and create parkland.

I am very much supportive of Proposition C, which will dedicate \$149 million towards our parks and pools, and I am speaking in favor of it on the campaign trail. Should the voters pass it in November, we need to work to leverage these funds as much as possible, to ensure we are addressing as many of our needs as possible. We should also be more proactive in reaching out to commercial landowners for the establishment of public improvement districts (PIDs), where a little private investment in parkland could not only increase their land values but fill some gaps in the system in the process, without any impact to our general fund.

With regard to the recycling receptacles, I understand there is a proposal to increase the Clean Community Fee by \$0.13 to help pay for recycling receptacles in the parks. I am generally supportive of this plan, as it fairly limited in its long-term financial impacts for residents; however, because this would increase a regressive, flat-rate fee, I would also like to explore some other funding possibilities. For example, because some of the receptacles would be placed around metered parking lots to help keep them clean, some of the parking meter revenue could be used to lower the impact on the Clean Community Fee.

Austin Parks Foundation is continuously involved in community engagement to ensure that our projects and work align with community values and needs. What is your philosophy on community engagement, and how would you engage with the community to ensure that their needs around parks and open space are appropriately addressed?

As a three-time council aide, I can say that community engagement is the predominant role of the City Council to ensure that the community's voices are being heard and reflected in adopted policy. With regard to parkland, especially, the use of master planning is incredibly important so that impacted residents have input into proposed changes of use within the parks, along with advance notice of changes to come.

At a minimum, changes in parkland policy should always default to review by the Parks and Recreation Board, but we should also be sending notice to registered neighborhood associations and neighborhood contact teams, to ensure that sufficient community conversation is occurring.

The current Parks Director has done a great job in engaging with the community and reaching out to known stakeholders in advance of upcoming projects. I will continue to work with her to continue this practice and help give her the resources needed to do this.

What do you believe the role of private partners should be in maintaining and improving public parks? What actions would you take to strengthen and improve public-private partnerships?

To the extend public-private partnerships can augment our general fund revenue without limiting the level of service for our residents, they should be explored. In a prior question, I spoke about the possibility of using public improvement districts (PIDs) to help maintain and enhance parks, without additional impact to our general fund. This is an example where the benefits to the private entities are not in conflict with the public, so everyone can benefit from the partnership.

Where I would get concerned is where the partnership encroaches more onto the privatization spectrum. Providing access to parkland for families is an important function of local government, which supports community health and education. The ability to pay should not influence whether a family has access to our parks.

Parkland dedication fees are one mechanism by which the city funds park acquisition and improvements. What is your stance on parkland dedication fees, and are you in favor of maintaining them during the Land Development Code updating process?

As stated above, I support maintaining a strong parkland dedication ordinance. In 2015, I supported strengthening the parkland dedication ordinance, even beyond what was ultimately adopted by the council. Between first and second reading, there were amendments made to the ordinance that weakened what had passed on first reading, including capping the amount of parkland that would need to be dedicated in much of central Austin. I would've opposed those amendments that weakened the ordinance, and I would support improving the ordinance as part of revised land development code to be more reflective of the ordinance originally passed on first reading.

Do you consider parks an important community asset? Why?

The protection of parkland and greenspace is part of our City's soul. It's the main reason that Austin is one of the most disable places to live in the country. By preserving shared space for our community, we have used our power as a collective to better the lives of all residents.
