

2018 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name

Natasha Harper-Madison

**What's your favorite park in Austin?
Why?**

My favorite park in Austin is Dottie Jordan park, although I have at least 3 close runners up (Givens, Pease, Zilker). Primarily my attachment to the park is tied to my family's history of visiting several times weekly for decades, especially on Sundays when the neighborhood congregates for family gatherings and fun. I also have had amazing community connections and excitement by watching basketball games played by folks, young and more seasoned, from the area.

I love that the pool and grounds are well maintained, as well as the great shaded areas within the park. It's minutes away from my home and I can easily access it by bike or bus- which is fantastic for me! My children love the playgrounds. I love to sit in one of the swings facing the amazing treeline at the rear of the park and watch them play. I also love the shade that the massive canopy of trees overhead provides.

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?

This is a great question and is of the utmost importance to me, I especially appreciate the emphasis on "quality" parks. Equitable access to parks, green spaces, trails, pools, etc is a quality of life issue that can not be ignored. I would work for my district by increasing community events and team sports, etc, that promote visitation from ALL types of residents to the parks we currently have across D1 as well as propose plans for partnerships to create more parks in areas of need. As a decision maker for Austin, I will work tirelessly to champion the efforts of organizations whose missions increase access, availability and quality amenities for parks, pools and other open/green spaces. As an anecdote I want to share that as a kid in poverty in Austin, that our singular opportunity to explore and live freely was in parks! This was also, entirely inadvertently my formative opportunity to play with kids who didn't look or sound like me- intentional community building at it's finest.

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?

Well maintained parks, pools, playgrounds and grounds- in all parts of Austin- are resources that should be afforded to all. The \$125 million deficit is reflective of the level of priority we place on maintenance and improvement. We must address a myriad of issues in order to implement strategy including waste that exists from ineffective and duplicative programs. The first step would be to present the importance of the impeccable maintenance of public recreational spaces. I would like to create and deploy private partnerships, including but not limited to the University of Texas' aquatics programs, grounds keeping partnerships, resource recovery partnerships and most importantly deploy more Austin Parks current and newly recruited staff to accommodate the need.

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?

The first parks I remember being of importance to me in my formative experiences are the ones I visit with frequency with my children now, Alamo, Dottie Jordan, Givens, Bartholomew, Springdale, Rosewood and Zilker- I'm certain there are more but they are the last vestiges of community spaces in D1. You effectively engage with the "community" by meeting them where they are- always. Relationships that are built in authenticity and true concern take time to build which is one reason I'm right for the job- I have been building these relationships for nearly 40 years. In my block walking, and having people in this community inherently trust me, one concern addressed many times over was that the East 12th community believes that ALL of Givens park will become a dog park. I have worked tirelessly to combat that narrative, both because it's not true and because I feel a duty to absolve the fear placed on east Austin citizens by provocateurs. Community engagement, the assessment of values and truly efficient engagement requires time, trust and local leadership- local meaning you grew up in this community, have remaining family and thus are a stakeholder in this community- period.

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?

As mentioned above, I have no doubt that the way forward, in the face of years of under investment, is through partnerships. In my role as a community advocate I'm often tasked with finding the money, talent and various other resources to help see people through hard times. I have amassed a thick rolodex of contacts and resource connections. It would be my sworn duty to tap into these and discover others to benefit our ever important park spaces. Sustainability in partnerships requires understanding of one another's interests and a benefit to all parties involved. I believe this should be driven by data and compassionate leadership.

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?

I support the deployment of this and other mechanisms that maintain current and create future park projects. It is imperative that Austin residents have access to housing, food, transportation, jobs, healthcare, education and parks (open/green spaces). I am absolutely in favor of maintaining parkland dedication fees as we make adjustments to our land development code. Our lived environment definitely shapes our experiences and ultimately the way we see ourselves and others. The absence of parks has tangible, measurable effects on the human condition- we need them in order to thrive.

Do you consider parks an important community asset? Why?

Absolutely! Anecdotally, as a kid parks were a place of solace, tranquility, joy and imagination. As a kid who existed in poverty, parks were a place where the absence of wealth for my family was of no importance because they were free. As a teen and young adult this continued to ring true. As a mother of four- amazingly this free, accessible, fun resource continues to be a beacon of recreation, enjoyment and connection for my family and extending into our community. Parks are a place where neighbors come together, a place where all are welcome and worries are suspended. The importance of the diversity represented at parks, both by way of economics and race, is nearly immeasurable. From a health and wellness (both physical and mental) perspective, people NEED the ability to enjoy open, green spaces. We need the ability to breath fresh air, exercise, gaze upon natural beauty and experience the freedom of one of the only judgement free zones a city can provide its residents. Not only are parks free, they represent freedom- there's nothing more inherently necessary for the human existence than freedom.
