

2018 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name

Rich DePalma

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

I know our park system well. For over three years I have served as the Vice-Chair of the Parks and Recreation Board, I've been to every developed park in our system and each of our parks provides a different experience. I love that about them. Of course, like most folks, I love Zilker Park. I appreciate the history of the land (Col. Andrew Zilker, the Tonkawa and Comanche settlements), the rumors (Coronado having rested there while looking for El Dorado), its unique spaces (Zilker Hillside Theater, the Botanical Gardens, etc.), and how the city and the world come together to enjoy the oasis of Barton Springs Pool and events like ACL and the Zilker Kite Festival. The park symbolizes so much that I appreciate: the public gift of Barton Springs by Col. Zilker in 1917, the later donation of the rest of Zilker Park in 1934 to the school district to permit it to raise money from sale of the land to the city, the environmental protection of the springs, and the protection of the Barton Springs salamander. When I am at Zilker, not only do I see Austin's past but I also see its future.

One Austin park will always have a special place in my soul: Dick Nichols Park. Any park adopter will understand why. Dick Nichols is where I began my park advocacy when I co-founded Friends of Dick Nichols Park in 2007 to address graffiti and issues with the playground. At our first It's My Park Day in 2007 we had over 80 volunteers. Since that time, our group has grown to a list of over 300 volunteers that are the stewards of the park. Over the years we have planted 100 trees, spread an unknown amount of mulch, spread pounds of native wildflower seeds in the meadow, removed graffiti, repainted everything multiple times over, coordinated art project restorations, obtained funding from Austin Parks Foundation for the playground shadescape, advocated for the replacement of a broken trail workout system, and hosted over 24 events. Dick Nichols Park is where our community comes together, seniors stay healthy, birthdays are celebrated, kids and adults play, nature is protected, and where new friendships are created. I enjoy being there with my boys but also appreciate the days where I can just sit under an Escarpment Oak and watch how happy the parks make all those who visit. I love this park and I am grateful for my connection to it.

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?

Equitable access to quality parks can be measured multiple ways. One way is whether there is a public park within a 10 minute walk or within a 1/4 mile to 1/2 mile from homes. Under this definition, we have park deficiencies across the city with District 4 being the most park deficient district (at least until the Red Leaf development is built out at Highland Mall). In District 8, we have park deficiencies around the Scenic Brook neighborhood area along Highway 71, past the Oak Hill Y.

There is much more to equitable access than green space (albeit that is extremely important). In 2013, I was invited to serve on the Austin Parks Foundation board of directors. At that time, I started questioning whether our park system was accessible and equitable. Unfortunately, there was not much data available so I started compiling the data myself, looking at the availability of aquatic facilities, basketball courts, free tennis courts, ball fields, soccer fields, playgrounds, senior centers, and recreation centers. There is still much more data needed and to be analyzed but I was surprised at my findings - it contradicted what I was hearing. What the data showed was that most of North and South Austin had the least amount of park and recreation investment. SW

Austin had very little investment. There is one pool (two if counting Barton Springs), no senior center, no recreation center, two basketball courts, three ball fields, and four playgrounds (if counting Zilker Park). This is especially concerning around the Oak Hill Y area where we have a concentration of mobile homes, public housing and nonprofit affordable housing. These seniors and kids are being left out of the discussion.

Another item of frustration for me relating to accessibility is the lack of an All Abilities/Inclusive Play Park at a City of Austin park. Round Rock, San Antonio and many cities both large and small have implemented All Abilities parks and Austin has not. Our friends of at the YMCA in SW Austin just received a grant from Target and Kaboom to install an All Abilities playscape at their facility. I am excited about that park but we need such parks all over the city. Every child deserves to be a child and to engage with other kids, to explore and to smile. Over the years I have advocated for these inclusive playgrounds at Dick Nichols and Zilker Park. This week, I was excited about the draft playscape and play equipment at Dick Nichols Park that will be more inclusive. We still need to find the funding for the rubber surface which is around \$75,000. This will allow children in wheelchairs or other mobility challenges to access the play equipment.

What I love about the Parks and Recreation Department is that it has an excellent and dedicated staff. This was not always the case. The staff is only limited by funding, staffing and the city's bureaucracy. Each improvement we make to any of those items allows the Parks Department to better leverage community, nonprofit, for-profit and intergovernmental partnerships for the betterment of the parks system.

I support addressing the challenges found in the June 2018 Equity

Assessment Tool Pilot Report. I support implementing existing plans such as the 2014 Urban Trail Master Plan along with the YBC Trail and the Williamson Creek Trail which I am working on.

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?

I served on the Aquatics Master Plan Task Force and we developed a range of ideas to explore from public private partnerships, increasing fees, etc. Although park funding has grown to around \$108 a person up from around \$87 a person in 2013, deferred maintenance over decades along with explosive growth has created challenges for the park system.

I support diverse funding options to address \$125 million in annual deferred maintenance including the Parkland Dedication and Hotel Occupancy Tax ordinances.

I also recently voted in favor of recommendations relating to the recycling made by the Parks Board appointed Task Force and how that work moves us closer to Austin's Zero Waste 2040 goals.

Here are some mid-term strategies:

Playground maintenance? - Develop a maintenance plan that includes senior volunteers who can be certified as playground safety specialists

Aquatics -? Increase fees, P3 with Dell Children's hospital and AISD for a natatorium that includes therapy pools to offset maintenance and operations funding. Partner with AISD and YMCA for a facility at the Burger Center. Partner with YMCA for a small natatorium at Mabel Davis. Consolidate two pools in East Austin if it can be determined that service to the neighborhoods could be improved. Increase fees by a dollar and implement mobile pay. Determine energy savings if upgrading pool filter motors and lights. Create a volunteer program that allows volunteers to maintain and even operate pools. This would allow our youth to serve as lifeguards without mixing other duties unless needed.

Mowing? - Assess if there are economies of scale with consolidating mowing contracts currently held across departments (Parks, Public Works, HACA, etc...) or whether the City of Austin should bring mowing in-house for all public facilities (if it can be done cheaper).

Trash and Recycling Receptacles ?- On the Parks Board I voted in favor of the rollout and funding recommendations made by the Parkland Recycling Task Force during the Parks Board meeting in August 2018.

Long term idea:

Move to a parks district funding model whether it is a macro (one district) or micro (multiple regional districts). The model would be similar to the Goodnight Park District in SE Austin.

Another model to consider is the integrated model of the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB). The IMPRB is a component unit of the City of Minneapolis and has an integrated budget process that includes the MPRB, Board of Estimate and Taxation and City of Minneapolis.

Here is coverage of our aquatic system:

<https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2018-06-01/austins-pool-system-will-colla-pse-if-we-dont-save-it/>

<http://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/austin/news/2018/02/01/task-force-encourages-austin-leaders-to-adopt--124m-pool-plan>

More information on park funding:

<https://communityimpact.com/austin/news/2015/08/26/changes-in-the-works-for-parks-funding/>

https://www.minneapolisparcs.org/_asset/3gmhqt/Budget-Process-Overview.pdf

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?

Shoal Creek Conservancy is leading on community engagement. The engagement focus is in the community impacted. There is a clear understanding of the environmental considerations/challenges. Active listening is used and communication with stakeholders is made to close the loop.

All general community engagement should be coordinated with other departments and government entities to maximize stakeholder time. As the former Vice-President of Oak Hill Association of Neighborhoods (representing the 35 neighborhoods in SW Austin), I brought in CapMetro, Parks Department, AISD and Public Works to a candidate forum in 2016 so they could reach out to community members who they would not be in contact with during normal outreach. This strategy was successful and should be replicated.

I'd also like to see our online engagement change to focus on the questions of the month, and where the community knows to go to a specific website and chooses which questions it would like to answer. If overall engagement is sought, then we can create a gamification approach where there are incentives for participation.

Here is what Shoal Creek is doing:

<https://shoalcreekconservancy.org/programs/community-engagement/>

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?

Private partners play a major role through either direct or indirect investment of funding or volunteers. A great example is of course C3, but also other companies such as Cirrus Logic play an important role within specific green spaces such as Shoal Creek.

Our public private partnerships are only limited by the internal resources the department has available and the limitations of implementing the partnership such as permitting, legal, and interdepartmental coordination.

An action I would like to see is hiring a consulting team that would include Texas A&M's Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences Department as a teaming partner, to assess the city's current approach and compare it to best practices seen in Chicago, Houston New York City, or other cities if warranted.

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 helped pass the current parkland dedication ordinance. It was done by bringing diverse interests together. This was not easy work and a state legislative bill was filed to remove the ordinance. I defended the ordinance at the state legislature during the last legislative session. I support parkland dedication fees and always want to evaluate ordinances to determine if modifications need to be made based on how the ordinance performs.

For more on the Parkland Dedication Ordinance:

<http://www.downtownaustin.com/news-article/austin-city-council-approves-new-parkland-dedication-ordinance>

Do you consider parks an important community asset? Why?

Parks are a critical community asset for physical and mental health (the physical activity, fresh air, and personal reflection), protection of the environment (they provide a place for our urban canopy, wildlife and stormwater detention), public safety (studies show that active parks have a direct correlation to lower crime--more eyes on the street), and community bonding (parks are a space where the community comes together). I have binders of data available for my fellow park geeks.
