

JENNIFER FOR AUSTIN

Austin City Council
District 10

“Reimagining Our City Council”

I'm Jennifer Virden, and I'm running to be the City Council member for District 10. Austin desperately needs a moderate, fiscally responsible voice, as well as diversity of thought, on our City Council. I believe that our City leaders should focus on providing core municipal services, rather than producing a “transformational change” of society.

Three City Council decisions in recent years are harming the quality of life of Austin residents—cutting the Austin Police Department budget, allowing homeless camping, and passage of the new land development code (formerly known as CodeNEXT).

City government shouldn't pander to the will of a vocal few by implementing policies that disable our vital first responders. Reckless de-funding of critical municipal core services threatens the very order of society and the safety of our community. We should value our police officers, not demonize them. The Austin Police Department's overall track record is one of consistent community service - they shouldn't be judged by a few exceptional situations. How can a dedicated, hometown police chief be a hero one year and a problem the next without just cause? Virtually overnight, our city became frighteningly less safe by a reckless, unanimous City Council vote. Since City Council voted unanimously to “defund the police”, response times have increased, experienced officers have left for other cities, and staffing shortages will worsen as recruitment suffers. A period of civil unrest, a pandemic, and economic turmoil is no time to experiment with crucial core public safety services. We need a carefully thought out, holistic approach to public safety (police, fire and EMS). It's time for more critical thinking and less “reimagining.”

The Council's failed homeless policies have already created a blight on our city, perpetuating a depressing atmosphere that undermines our image as a vibrant, world-class city. As many Austinites would agree, parts of Austin now look worse than a “developing” country. We need to restore our image and our role as a city to which the rest of the country aspires to be like. It is not compassionate to enable people to live under bridges, and it is not fair to Austin residents for public spaces to be taken over for private use. Along with allowing camping on public property, the Council's repeal of restrictions on panhandling and sitting or lying on sidewalks, has made Austin a magnet for the homeless. Council must reinstate those ordinances. We Austinites do not aspire to become Portland, Seattle, or San Francisco. It's time for REAL solutions to the homeless crisis. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. There are already proven solutions in practice, such as San Antonio's Haven for Hope model, and Travis County's Mobile Loaves & Fishes Community! First model. For those who prefer to camp, they should be legally mandated to camp only in designated areas where sanitation, 24-hour security, and comprehensive City and volunteer social services are provided. This issue is so critical to the future of quality of life in Austin that I have posted a more detailed position paper about the homeless crisis on my website. We can solve this!

The new Land Development Code passed by City Council attempted to take away property owners' rights by rezoning the entire city at once. If the District Court hadn't stopped Austin from implementing the plan, neighborhoods adjacent to main streets would already be forever changed with dramatically increased density of residential development, replacing the neighborhood feel that Austinites enjoy. We must ensure that a new Land Development Code does not significantly increase density in District 10 neighborhoods and that property owners' notice and protest rights are maintained. Zoning changes must continue to be considered on a case-by-case basis (and not City-wide).

Bad policy enacted by our current City Council is so flagrant that it's become impossible to ignore. Signs of its failed initiatives are evident all over our city. What's at stake is whether or not we Austinites have the desire, or can even afford to, continue building our lives in this world-class city; the time for real change is NOW! Rather than our City Council reimagining public safety, I want to reimagine our City Council. I want to imagine a City Council that respects the will of the majority of Austinites, not just those with the loudest voices or the most radical ideas.

In the middle of a pandemic that devastated large sections of the Austin economy, our City Council passed and put on the ballot a massive property tax increase which starts this year, to fund a rail system that won't open for at least ten years and won't have any material impact on traffic. District 10 voted against this tax increase, but to no avail—it passed City-wide. Homeowners in District 10 will pay more of this tax than anyone but not receive any benefit. In response, I want to increase the homestead exemption to 20%, the maximum allowed by State law, from the current 10%. This will mitigate some of the increase on homeowners. Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth all have 20% homestead exemptions. It's time for Austin to join them, instead of burdening our homeowners more. City Council has used District 10 homeowners as an ATM machine long enough—I want to limit the withdrawals.

I'm a native Austinite, and I am a lifelong resident of what is now our District 10. I remember when "Don't mess with Texas" and "Keep Austin Weird" were first coined. Back then, Austin was just beginning to hit its stride; everyone wanted to live here. We were a special, desirable place with a reasonable cost of living and abundant natural resources scaled to our population. Rather than encouraging high density development that disregards property rights and stresses our parks, greenbelts and creeks, we should implement thoughtful growth policies to protect what makes us special. Densifying our city at the expense of our park-like traditional neighborhoods would be a step backward and would diminish our quality of life. Let's "Keep Austin, Austin," and stop heading in the direction of Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco.

A little about me: I'm married to Keith, a Midwesterner from Iowa who got here as fast as he could, to pursue a career in high tech. We have two grown children – a son, 27, and a daughter, 25. They are both UT Austin McCombs School of Business graduates, and they're successful businesspeople here in Austin. I'm an independent real estate broker and remodeling general contractor. My children and I all graduated from Doss Elementary School, Murchison Middle School, Anderson High School, UT Austin, and

took a few classes at ACC along the way. I didn't just arrive here in Austin from out of town and decide to try running for City Council because I needed a job. I'm running for this representative position because I feel a sense of urgency to act now - I can no longer sit on the sidelines and just watch the decline of the city where I was born and raised. I feel it is my duty to do what I can to correct the current trajectory of Austin's future.

To be clear, we should run our city government finances just like we do our own personal finances – we have to make strategic choices and be proud of our willingness to delay gratification on the items we deem to be more wishes than needs. Let's get our spending under control and stop raising taxes just because it's become a habit.

On December 15 we have a real opportunity to alter this council. We are proud Austinites. Let's return to being the city that others aspire to be - not repeat others' failed policies. We have to start electing representatives who don't just need a job or a political "stepping stone" – they've got to have the love of Austin in their DNA! I'm that person for District 10.