



City of Austin

Late Backup

Ora Houston, Council Member District 1

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Public Statement on Item #28

I want to preface my comments by saying Austin is an extremely interesting place to live. We place high value on the environment, the conservation of natural resources, local flora and fauna. We value small businesses and large industries. We have wonderful and weird people and yet no one can deny that there is a marked difference in the way our assets are treated in one part of our community compared to the far reaches of East, Northeast and Southeast Austin. Our parkland has been neglected. Our neighborhoods have been neglected and neither industry nor small businesses have been offered incentives to locate here.

Item #28 is not about the environment, natural resources, flora or fauna. Item #28 is about people, opportunity, economic development and hope.

From the point of view of a member of the community, homeowners and renters have lived East of Highway 183 since the 70's, faithfully paying their property taxes, directly or through increases in rent, and living their lives with limited or no services or amenities.

Whether real or perceived, the growth industry in this city has encouraged migration to the East. Policies, procedures and practices have been designed and codified to benefit a few people to the detriment of many people. People whose voices are heard and people whose voices are not heard. People with high resources and people with low resources. People with power and access and people who have no power and no access. We have all read recent articles in industry publications and the newspaper about the state of economic segregation and gentrification in Austin.

Although people are migrating further East, there has been a lack of planning for infrastructure as the population grows in our direction. I am referring to basic structural and community benefits such as jobs, full service grocery, reliable transit and health care. Things that we take for granted in our neighborhoods.

In addition to people and parkland, a valuable asset in District #1 is the availability of commercial property waiting for someone to develop. There have been and continue to be real opportunities to recruit businesses and clean industries into the district.

The 'innovation zone' could have been placed in District #1, outside the congested central business district. Innovation is an organic process that can be located anywhere within the corporate city limits. The first 'innovation project' could have been to identify companies and industries with job opportunities for locals. Entities willing to work with the unemployed and the underemployed; people returning from the criminal justice system, veterans, and young people – people who are not able to find employment that pays a living wage. That would have been helpful for the people in our district and districts on either side.

Adults, seniors and children who live East of Hwy. 183 have been waiting patiently for the city to get serious about employment opportunities. We now find ourselves in a situation where many people see the public/private partnership to create golf courses as the way to get the jobs, financial resources and community benefits that are needed, before another 15 years passes.

Fifteen years ago, another Council member, Willie Lewis, supported another golf course on this same parkland. The courses were not constructed and the City of Austin and her partners returned to a familiar position in relationship to my community – out of sight, out of mind – nothing changes.

This time the parkland remains parkland. 500 – 700 acres is minuscule when we talk about 1,800 acres of parkland. The issue of water has been neutralized - the developer will provide and treat water from his resources. The developer will comply with the city's pesticide management plan. There will be public access to this part of the park for the first time in 35+ years. Jobs will be created at the golf course and at the hotel/conference center on adjacent property. Revenue will be collected from non-resident golfers to fund unfunded parks in the area. We will be mindful of the water, fish, birds and wildlife.

Whether Item #28 passes or fails, my expectation of the City of Austin and her partners is to craft a strategy with time-lines, measures and outcomes in coordination with community members to build the required infrastructure and attract additional employment opportunities to the area.

Item #28 is a risk free opportunity to jump start the development of employment and amenities in the area. Many of the people in the area have been working non-stop with the parks department and the developer to codify the community benefits the community has requested and the developer has agreed to. They are aware of the possible risks and stand ready to take those chances to improve the quality of their lives and the lives of their children.

With that said, I am voting **for** this agreement and I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

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District #1
Austin City Council