

# **Candidate Questionnaire on Austin Energy Issues**

## **Participating Organizations:**

- **Public Citizen**
- **SEED Coalition**
- **Sierra Club**
- **Solar Austin**
- **Texas ROSE (Ratepayers' Organization to Save Energy)**
- **Clean Water Action**
- **Austin Climate Action Network**
- **Texas Drought Project**
- **First Unitarian Universalist Green Sanctuary Ministry**
- **Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church**

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**1. The mission of the Austin Energy Department is to deliver clean, affordable reliable energy and excellent customer service. During your term, what will be the most important challenge for the city in regard to Austin Energy?**

The biggest challenge will be expansion of generation capacity to meet the needs of a growing population in a cost effective but sustainable manner. This will include increase in energy supply, but also advances in efficiency in order to promote lowered per capita demand.

**2. From a citywide and district perspective, briefly describe your vision for managing and improving Austin Energy?**

I don't see the districts goals as being much different than the overall goals for the city. I don't see the City Council's role as directly managing Austin Energy as much as governance, which includes operational goals and policy setting. The goals of affordable and sustainable energy are in line with the values of many District 5 voters. As renewable energy sources continue to become more cost effective, smart grid technology and rooftop solar generation technology improve, and energy storage systems improve it is realistic to look at an energy generation mix relies on natural gas and renewables. Thus, the city can continue to steer Austin Energy toward more holistic energy generating and management model (the "integrated utility" mentioned in the Generation Task Force Report) as opposed to a more traditional generation and sale model. As for improvements, District 5 does stand out as having many neighborhoods receptive to an enhanced solar panel rebate. Certain neighborhoods, like Zilker, are undergoing much redevelopment and would be good markets a robust solar rebate program with panels installed during remodeling or rebuilding on site. For those with moderate incomes who own older homes, a robust efficiency enhancement program could be of great benefit. District 5 has areas that would be candidates for a smart grid program like Pecan Street Project.

**3. What is your position on climate change?**

I do think that the planet is in a natural warming cycle, but that human activity has exacerbated and accelerated it. I find the denial of climate change interesting considering my experience with risk management, since the Department of Defense, offshore energy companies, shipping companies, and major insurance carriers are taking the potential results of climate change seriously (three of these groups are not known for environmental sensitivity, but they are known for caring about risks to their operations; the latter group stays in business via accurate risk assessment). The State Department and U.S. intelligence agencies have legitimate concerns about global political instability resulting from climate change. Thus, it's hard to deny it's happening. While we cannot figure out the degree to which humans are affecting it, it does seem logical for us to minimize said effect to the extent we can.

4. **Do you support implementation of the recommendations in the report developed by the [Austin Generation Resource Planning Task Force](#) and are there any other specific changes you would like made to the [Austin Energy Resource, Generation and Climate Protection Plan to 2020](#)? What would you change and how?**

Overall I like the idea of supporting clean, affordable energy and the related economic benefits from supporting technological innovations in energy generation and efficiency enhancements. I'm also supportive of more aggressive use and rebating of rooftop solar as part of a smart grid system. However, designation of solar power as default generation will require storage technology to support reliance on solar in light of its variable nature. I would need to know more about alternative sources of on-demand generation capacity if the city is going to retire Decker (e.g., would a more advanced, efficient gas plant make sense, or could we tap the ERCOT grid for enough wholesale electricity to meet Austin's needs at an affordable price?). This seems of particular concern as the city also plans to disengage from the LCRA coal plant in Fayette and the STNP. While I don't like the coal plant in Fayette, would need to see additional studies as to whether the taking over of a generator and then not using is the most cost effective way to disengage from the plant. I would also need to know more about the partnership agreement with LCRA before agreeing that moving to take full ownership of a generator and then shutting it down is a prudent idea. While I support incentivizing efficiency in building and solar panel use, I would want to see economic impact studies before supporting and requirements to builders or property owners.

5. **City Council serves as the board of directors for Austin Energy. As a council member, what do you consider your role to be in regard to Austin Energy's governance?**

I think the role is the same as any director for a utility, which is to set the strategic objectives and general policies for the organization. In the case of Austin Energy, it is different than a corporately owned utility in that it is ultimately accountable to the people of Austin as opposed to shareholders. This allows the city to pursue goals of affordability and sustainable in addition to generating revenue.

6. **What renewable energy resources and programs should be incorporated into the Austin Energy generation resource mix?**

Looking at the supply side first, Austin has solar and wind energy added into the generation resource mix. We should expand the use of solar power generation on commercial and residential rooftops, as well as encouraging the incorporating of these systems into the power grid. Commercial property owners, in some cases, may also be good candidates for small wind turbines. The ability of property owners to generate power on site (and sell it back into the grid at decent rates) helps with

affordability issues related to operation expenses of property ownership. The downside of wind and solar is that it is not always available owing to natural conditions, and thus must be supplemented with other on-demand generation capacity or power purchased wholesale from other generation companies. On the demand side, Austin Energy can continue to work on promoting energy efficiency in new development and in incentivizing efficiency retrofitting in existing development. Furthermore, the smart grid projects (such as the Pecan Street Project) should be extended to cover much more of the city.

**7. How and to what extent should Austin Energy provide customer energy efficiency programs?**

For existing structures, Austin Energy can provide the resources for property owners and can cooperate in retrofitting structures. Financial incentives for homeowners to retrofit for more efficiency, or to add in solar panels should be maintained (it can be a large capital expense for homeowners, but the long term benefits are lower costs for them and reduced stress on the local grid and Austin Energy's generation capacity). Austin Energy can also help by easing certain requirements for the solar rebate and sellback programs, and to make sure the solar panel permitting process is simple. Austin Energy should work with the city and developers to incentivize the building of more energy efficient homes and commercial structures, and should continue to work with low income home owners to provide quality insulation and other efficiency promoting improvements (e.g., the weatherization programs). Ultimately, there should be a goal for a citywide smart grid that aids in the efficient and affordable allocation of energy.

**8. What are your thoughts on whether Austin Energy should invest in more nuclear reactors and whether the utility should remain involved in the existing South Texas Project reactors after their currently scheduled retirement dates of 2027 and 2028 if they get relicensed for 20 additional years?**

It is my understanding that Austin Energy has chosen to not invest in an expansion of the STNP. This appears to be a sensible decision in light of the multitude of problems the plant has experienced and the ownership/management/operation problems that appear to be looming in its future. Nuclear power's upside is competitively priced electricity, while the downside risk ranges from radiation leaks to environmental catastrophes.