

# Candidate Questionnaire on Climate and Energy

350 Austin, Solar Austin, Earth Day Austin, Shades of Green

**Candidate Name:** Laura Morrison

**Candidate For:** Mayor of Austin

## 1. What are your top three priorities for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Austin, and what actions would you take to implement needed changes?

**Build high-capacity transit.** Vehicle emissions will soon overtake electrical generation as the main contributor to greenhouse gases in the Austin area. As our city continues to grow, we must find ways to significantly reduce the number of vehicles on our roads. As mayor, I will work with residents, Cap Metro and other governmental partners, to build high-capacity transit in Austin.

As mayor, I will lead an effort for a successful transit proposal which must be community-driven and must gain the support of broad coalitions, including organizations and individuals committed to the environment, job access, equity, and public health. It must include: proactive plans to minimize displacement that may arise from rising property values near planned transit centers; programs to stabilize local businesses that may be disrupted during constructions; and an innovative, realistic and transparent finance plan.

Many other cities, including some in Texas, have made recent strides in implementing high-capacity transit, and we can learn from their success. We must also learn from Austin's past mistakes. A major failure of the most recent light rail election was the planners' rejection of community input on the proposed route, which undoubtedly contributed to its defeat at the polls.

**Achieve the goal of retiring Fayette by 2022.** I am proud of my strong environmental record on energy issues as a council member from 2008 - 2014, a commitment I will continue as mayor. A key goal that we set in the 2014 Austin Energy Resource, Generation and Climate Protection Plan, was to set a retirement date for the Fayette Coal plant for the first time: 2022. Setting a goal is certainly an important first step, but not enough. As mayor I will work to ensure that the goal is met.

In particular, I will ask that quarterly progress reports on reaching the retirement goal be placed on the agenda of the Austin Energy Oversight Council Committee. We must adequately address the particular challenge due to the fact that the City does not own any of the Fayette units outright. To highlight the importance of this goal to the City Manager, I would include its

progress as an explicit element in his annual performance evaluation.

In addition, the cost of the retirement scenario must be planned for. The Austin Energy non-nuclear decommissioning fund likely will need significant additions to cover the cost. I will ask the staff to provide recommendations on how to adequately prepare financially for the Fayette Plant retirement, beginning now if possible or, at a minimum, by including it as an element of the cost of service study that will be done for the next rate case.

As a Council Member, I led the 2013 effort to maintain City Council authority over Austin Energy to ensure that community values for climate protection and renewable energy remain integrated in its operations. The Austin Energy Oversight Committee of the Whole was an outgrowth of that effort. The retirement of Fayette is a perfect example of how important that 2013 effort was.

**Ensure peak-carbon is reached by 2020 in Austin and raise community awareness on carbon emission reduction progress toward the 2050 goal.** It is interesting to note the recent announcement<sup>1</sup> that 27 major cities have achieved peak carbon as part of their local commitment to the Paris Agreement, while their populations and economies are growing. If Austin is to be part of the solution on climate change, we will need to meet that milestone by 2020, according to the report. An Austin plan to achieve this, if it exists, has not garnered attention, and would provide yet another means for monitoring our progress. In particular it could spotlight the frequency of running the Fayette plant which may be done at times even when renewable sources are available for the sake of financial gain and thus provide an opportunity for a discussion on the topic. As mayor, I will bring this action forward.

Given that individual choices impact greenhouse gas emissions, it is imperative that we take all opportunities such as a peak-carbon goal, to engender individual behavioral changes. A near-term goal to reach peak carbon is one such opportunity. But more can be done to enlist the community in taking action to reach the goal of being carbon free by 2050, by way of education and friendly competition.

**2. As mayor or council member, you will be a member of the Austin Energy Utility Oversight Committee. What will you do to make sure that Austin Energy takes the necessary steps to phase out its use of fossil fuels for power generation by 2030?**

As a member of the Council that adopted a goal for Austin Energy power generation to be carbon free by 2030, I remain committed to that goal. As with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globalclimateactions summit.org/27-cities-have-reached-peak/>

the retirement of Fayette, I will ask that quarterly progress reports on an effort to reach this goal be placed on the agenda of the Austin Energy Oversight Council Committee. Council Resolution 20170817-061 called for modelling on how to achieve the 2030 goal with a report to the Oversight Committee by September 2019. As mayor, I will take appropriate steps after hearing that report. To highlight the importance of this goal to the City Manager, I would include its progress as an explicit element in his annual performance evaluation.

**3. Despite declining costs of solar, many low income residents and multi-family housing tenants are challenged to participate in Austin Energy's existing rooftop solar programs. Do you think it is important to expand access to solar by developing targeted programs and policies at Austin Energy? Please explain.**

Yes. Expanded access to rooftop solar programs will be a key element in meeting our 2030 goal to fully transition away from fossil fuels. I strongly support developing targeted programs and policies to help bring solar options to more low-income residents and multi-family housing tenants.

All people in Austin should be able to be part of our efforts to save the planet: environmental equity demands it and the savings using solar can have meaningful impacts on the budgets of families with lower incomes. There are great examples<sup>2</sup> of programs to learn from, often discussed in the Union of Concerned Scientists monthly newsletter (which I read regularly).

**4. Local, distributed scale solar installation has produced values to the utility, community and the local economy. Do you support the expansion of utility investment programs (including rebates) for installing solar locally within the Austin Energy territory? Please explain.**

Yes. Increasing the use of local, distributed solar installations will be a key element in meeting our 2030 goal. I fully support expanding utility investment programs, including rebates, to promote local solar installations within the Austin Energy service area.

While I was on the Council, there was considerable push back against expanding our local solar goals. This led me to initiate the Local Solar Advisory Committee to do a deep dive into the costs and benefits of local solar. The Committee's recommendations, which we subsequently adopted, were based not only

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<sup>2</sup> [https://blog.ucsusa.org/derrick-jackson/affordable-solar-power-low-income-minority-neighborhood?\\_ga=2.70661328.1512058547.1537820684-1220187895.1537820684](https://blog.ucsusa.org/derrick-jackson/affordable-solar-power-low-income-minority-neighborhood?_ga=2.70661328.1512058547.1537820684-1220187895.1537820684)

environmental considerations but economic analyses that showed strong potential for creation of jobs if a significant goal was adopted.

It is critical that we expand the utility investment programs to ensure those goals are met and hopefully exceeded.

**5. What specific role and responsibility do you see Austin taking in responding to local, regional and international impacts of climate change, including preparing for large numbers of people displaced by extreme weather events?**

As the major city in our region, Austin must be prepared to take a lead role in responding to the local impacts of climate change, just as it must redouble its efforts to reduce greenhouse gases and other activities that contribute to its causes. I hold a graduate certificate in public health, community preparedness and disaster response, and prior to entering public service, I spent 10 years as an engineer and program manager for a global aerospace company, supervising a team of other engineers and managing a multimillion-dollar budget. This background has prepared me to work with city staff, other first responders and the community to establish effective response plans for extreme weather events and other possible impacts of our changing climate such as wildfires, to ensure the safety of all area residents. As mayor, I will work with our regional partners to ensure we have realistic and comprehensive emergency plans in Austin and coordinated with surrounding jurisdictions.

With my education, I understand specifically the role of the mayor in disaster response within the overall well-defined structure of a response, in particular to be a key in crisis communication, as a representative of the area in coordination with other areas, and as an authority as needed to make resources available. Mayor Will Wynn provided a great model for the role and responsibility of mayor in responding to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He was in regular contact with leaders in other cities and oversaw the quick setup of a major operation to accommodate evacuees in Austin that essentially created a small city at the Convention Center. He did it with astute ability and compassion, greeting each individual on each plane that came in from New Orleans.