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## 'Chronicle' Endorsements

### *May 10 municipal elections*

By the Editorial Board

*The May 10 municipal election ballot will not be very long but will propose crucial decisions: most prominently the three City Council seats and beyond them the Austin Independent School District bond propositions, with school district and college trustee seats also in play. We offer our editorial board endorsements for your careful consideration, and we urge you to vote your best judgment.* – The Editorial Board

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### **Place 1: Lee Leffingwell**

Incumbent Leffingwell's unspectacular, consensus-building approach to policy – while criticized in some quarters as insufficiently activist – has in fact made him one of the most productive of council members, especially in a first term. He is environmentally engaged and politically pragmatic, bringing together diverse or even opposing city interests in order to promote concrete, effective programs that enable greener redevelopment, reduce solid waste, conserve water and energy, and preserve shoreline open space along Lady Bird Lake. From his first day in office, he has labored to improve the city's (and region's) mental-health-care programs, despite the usual funding limitations. He has accepted the responsibility of planning for a rapidly growing city, and he has also sought ways to improve public safety while eliminating staffing inequities, in his still-embattled proposal to merge the city's police forces. His stint on the Capital Metro board, in collaboration with other council members as well as regional representatives, began to turn that agency in a more progressive direction – particularly in its treatment of its employees.

On the other hand, Leffingwell disappointed us on some issues in his first term – a too-easy surrender on Advanced Micro Devices, questionable support at best for the Northcross neighborhood against Lincoln Properties and Wal-Mart, a water conservation plan that was announced with much fanfare but seems very modest in its goals – these and a number of smaller issues left many enviro/progressives feeling let down, if not betrayed. The most pointed criticism of Leffingwell has come from challenger Jason Meeker, former spokesman of Responsible Growth for Northcross. Some of us believe that a more proactive council could have derailed the Wal-Mart project. But as a group we are unpersuaded that Leffingwell – because he's this election's handy incumbent target – should bear the blame for that complex defeat.

Moreover, those chastising Leffingwell neglect how he fought to reclaim power from city staff: endowing the city auditor with greater autonomy, increasing oversight of the city manager's spending, pushing for single-member districts (nearly universally supported by current council candidates), and other reforms. Considered as a whole, Leffingwell's term has been consistently progressive and steadily successful and offers no substantive reasons to replace him with a less experienced alternative.

And Leffingwell's opponents are indeed both less experienced and less accomplished. Meeker has run a clumsy, largely negative campaign, which at a minimum suggests he needs to cool off before re-engaging in public issues in some positive way. Allen Demling, by contrast, is a politically refreshing presence with a solid and consistent message: earth-friendly, bicycle-focused transportation, preserving Austin's live music and character, affordability, and governmental transparency. Although he's a relative beginner in local affairs and specifically politics, he has an intelligent approach to public policy that bears watching. He would be a welcome, progressive addition to the Transportation or Downtown commission, where he could also garner additional experience in how the city works.

But Austin needs an experienced, adept council member in Place 1 now, and that candidate is Lee Leffingwell.

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### Place 3: No Endorsement

While we traditionally prefer to recommend a candidate in each race, after several discussions we simply could not come to a consensus on the two major Place 3 candidates, so we decided instead to lay out briefly the opposing arguments concerning each.

In her frosh term, incumbent Jennifer Kim has demonstrated "heart in the right place" advocacy of community values. Her strengths include her scrappy independent voice and her voting record on affordable housing, small business, and Asian-American concerns. She has consistently supported environmental protection and responsiveness to neighborhoods. But unfortunately, Kim has not proven very effective at advancing new council policies that make a real difference on these issues. She has neither sponsored nor co-sponsored successful major initiatives. Why this ineffectiveness? Bluntly, she's not a good team player, she's been somewhat aloof from citizens, and she lacks political instincts and skills. Her positions on issues, and her votes on the dais, too often blow with the wind. As a result, she has lost the trust and respect of most council colleagues and of staff and community members who previously supported her. Some of her last-minute vote switches seem calculated to burnish her image and curry favor, at the expense of her colleagues: Choice examples include forsaking the council pay raise and refusing to approve the new city manager. Time and again, Kim has failed to build the relationships and demonstrate the consistency of vision that an elected official must have to carry water on important issues. As a result, she's weakly positioned for a second term.

As an alternative, Randi Shade deserves serious consideration. Unfortunately, her campaign has not clearly defined her platform beyond "it's time for a change." On key issues, her positions are in fact very similar to Kim's, so the question returns to effectiveness. Prominently, Shade has called for joint council-nonprofit initiatives to help people living in poverty – and she has a long track record of working within public and private institutions to help the most vulnerable folks. Shade's most alluring difference from Kim is her "plays-well-with-others" reputation for building consensus among disparate people and hammering out workable solutions in government, business, and community nonprofit groups. For a potential budget maven, her Harvard Master of Business Administration nicely balances Kim's Princeton Master of Public Administration. But Shade is unproven as a policy-maker, and she has no voting record on city boards or commissions.

That leaves the inevitable voter's question: Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know?

We'll be considering our cards carefully and playing our Place 3 hands on May 10 – and we urge Austin voters to do the same.

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### Place 4: Laura Morrison

The chance to fill Mayor Pro Tem Betty Dunkerley's term-limited seat has drawn six candidates, although three inexperienced filers appear motivated largely by a mixture of naivete and self-promotion. However, the three major candidates – Robin Cravey, Cid Galindo, and Laura Morrison – are highly experienced, very impressive, and all have worked directly with current council and staff on crafting workable policy initiatives – indispensably, they all know their way around City Hall.

It's a difficult choice for voters, but overall we believe Morrison's solid engineering and business background make her a pragmatic nuts-and-bolts choice to succeed budget-whiz Dunkerley. As former president of the Austin Neighborhoods Council, she has listened thoughtfully to the concerns of Austinites in every part of town and helped them to advance their interests. She has earned a reputation for fairness, balance, and respecting multiple points of view. Under her leadership, ANC maintained its impassioned, inclusive activism (and increased the voice of Eastside neighborhoods) while curtailing its tendency to reactionary NIMBYism. While we're lukewarm on the McMansion Ordinance itself, Morrison's leadership on the city's task force in shepherding it (as well as the Design Standards Mixed Use Ordinance) demonstrated her talent for tailoring city policies to reflect valid citizen concerns.

Attorney-poet Robin Cravey has served as a planning commissioner, has a long track record as an environmental activist (most recently on the Barton Springs Master Plan), and would undoubtedly be a stalwart environmental voice on the dais. His ties to the green council of years past – working with Max Nofziger and Daryl Slusher – underscore this; also in his favor is his familiarity with city government. He's the likeliest choice for voters whose first priorities are environmental defense and preservation. Yet outside of this area, Cravey's priorities and proposals are loosely defined. While his "vision for Austin" supports all the right things (affordability, walkable city, participatory democracy), we found his positions short on specific policies to achieve that vision.

By contrast, Cid Galindo has unveiled ambitious policy proposals: a comprehensive growth plan and a call for a central park, each grounded in the principles he espouses in his (admittedly recent) New Urbanism consulting work, a perspective developed while he served as a planning commissioner since 2004 (he stepped down to run for council). We like the depth of his proposal and its anti-sprawl, pro-green, New Urbanist principles. Galindo's self-proclaimed "independent" political affiliation has turned off some Democratic clubs, but in nonpartisan city elections we're not terribly abashed by his lack of ideological purity. However, with a Downtown development-focused mayor, flanked by a deferential council, we questioned whether Galindo's primary focus on Downtown, development, and regional planning (sustainable and New Urbanist as he may be) offers the right balance for this council.

In sum, we believe that as a consensus-builder who's strong on progressive issues, and with pragmatic experience across the entire city, Laura Morrison is the best Place 4 addition to the currently sitting council.

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## **Austin Community College Board of Trustees, Place 1: Tim Mahoney**

Austin Community College is at a crucial juncture. According to a recent Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce report, it has successfully kept its enrollment on pace with Austin's population explosion – but, the report warns, its modest enrollment goals over the next few years will cause it to fall behind. That is already having dire consequences for Austin's economy, as many Austin employers are having to recruit outside the region for qualified workers, especially in tech- and health-related fields. It's a time for some vision on the board (not to mention more resources from the state).

Of the top two candidates in this race, only one presented us with a vision. Unfortunately, we're not certain it's the right vision. Harrison Keller wants to redesign completely the way ACC educates students, saying that it needs to form partnerships with school districts to ensure that high school students are more strongly challenged and prepared before they ever get to postsecondary education. That sounds good enough on the surface, but there's one thing we just can't get past on Keller – his past. Keller is the research director for the House of Representatives, hired by none other than Speaker Tom Craddick. He has also worked for representatives Troy Fraser and Dianne Delisi, and while at UT's Charles A. Dana Center, he authored papers for the Texas Public Policy Foundation pushing the notion of tying public-school funding directly to student performance. He's a nice enough fellow who insists he is no ideologue – but the people with whom he's associated are ideologues of the worst sort, and however well-meaning he may be, we've seen the Lege often use variants on his concepts to punish educators rather than help them. We realize those ideas don't directly apply to community colleges, but it's close enough to give us great discomfort.

That leaves us with Tim Mahoney. While his history in liberal politics squares up better with our general outlook, he failed to inspire us. While Keller is all about specifics, Mahoney speaks more generally of community outreach and selling the idea of ACC to Austin and prospective students. It was all just a little fuzzy and gave us a picture of someone running for office not because he is driven by a goal but just because he wants a direction to channel his desire to serve and this was what was available. Yes, ACC board is an unpaid position, but still, the school is important enough that it deserves better. Therefore, the *Chronicle* offers up a tepid endorsement of Mahoney – we believe he at least aims in the direction we'd rather go, though he may not have the plan for how to get us there.

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## **Austin ISD Board of Trustees, District 3: Christine Brister**

Of the four seats on the AISD board of trustees up for re-election, only one – District 3 in North Central Austin – is contested. While that's disappointing, it's not surprising: A school trusteeship is an unpaid, demanding, and often thankless position. Of the two candidates running to replace the outgoing Johna Edwards, Christine Brister has served on several AISD advisory groups, while the less experienced Jerry Garcia is a statistics maven running on his life experience. The learning curve for a trustee is a sharp one: As District 2 trustee Sam Guzman has noted, the first year is all about getting your bearings. This year is one of the most important the district has faced in a decade, with a new superintendent to be selected and Johnston High School and Pearce Middle School each threatened with closing and requiring immediate attention. Brister's long record of districtwide involvement, plus her strong grasp of both general trends for AISD and issues for specific campuses, means she will be better qualified to hit the ground running. More importantly, she seems to know, in a clear-eyed way, what she's getting herself into.

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## **AISD Bond Proposals**

**Proposition 1: YES. \$187,797,315 for growth and overcrowding relief and to support academic achievement.**

**Proposition 2: YES. \$73,920,504 for health, safety and security, environmental improvements, and other district needs.**

**Proposition 3: YES. \$82,000,000 for education, special programs, and expansion.**

Since Austin ISD called the first meeting of the 2008 Citizens' Bond Advisory Committee last October, this bond package has been about priorities. There is no question that AISD schools are overcrowded and that student numbers are continuing to rise. Aging facilities and computers must be replaced; other renovations must be made to keep the district in health and safety, disability- and energy-usage code compliance. With three bond propositions totaling \$343 million, and growing concerns about the larger economic situation, voters may find themselves thinking about their own funding priorities. If all three propositions pass, they will add an additional maximum of \$17 per year per \$100,000 of appraised property value (\$9 for Proposition 1, \$4 for Proposition 2, \$4 for Proposition 3). Propositions 1 and 2 reflect unavoidable costs, mandated by federal, state, or city agencies, or provide funding to replace crumbling infrastructure or build more classrooms. Innovative solutions have been found to cut some costs – like using mobile computer carts rather than buying each student a laptop. But other projects and needs, like further classroom additions for more schools, were stricken from the list, because the committee and the school board realized that everything can't be done at once. Indeed, if Propositions 1 and 2 do not pass, because they are essentially mandatory, the district will instead have to pay for them out of the maintenance and operations budget.

The three parts of Proposition 3 are more a matter of choice, especially with another bond proposed for 2010 or 2011. AISD has debated a performing arts center since the 1970s, and voters in fact approved partial funding for one in the 2004 bond – but with no location yet chosen, this funding could again go unused. Anderson High School, like other schools, is overcrowded, but portable classrooms, while far from perfect, could temporarily relieve this pressure. There is little doubt that the city will eventually need another high school, but does it need to buy the land for it now? Voters should decide for themselves whether this wish list resolves urgent longstanding problems and essential future planning or whether Prop. 3 can wait for another day ... again.

The *Chronicle* strongly endorses Propositions 1 and 2, and only a little less strongly, we also endorse Proposition 3.

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## **TRAVIS CO. EARLY VOTING: April 28-May 6**

Travis Co. voters may vote at any early voting location. On election day, voters must vote in their precinct.

For a list of precinct locations, see [www.co.travis.tx.us/county\\_clerk/election/20080510/polls.asp](http://www.co.travis.tx.us/county_clerk/election/20080510/polls.asp), or call 238-VOTE (8683).

Early voting polls are open Monday-Saturday, 7am-7pm, and Sunday, noon-6pm, unless noted otherwise.

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## **EARLY VOTING LOCATIONS**

### **Central**

Howson Public Library, 2500 Exposition (M-F, 10am-7pm; Sat., 10am-5pm)

Washington Mutual Bank, 1000 E. 41st (M-F, 10am-6pm; Sat., 10am-1pm)

Travis County Offices, 5501 Airport Blvd.

Fiesta Mart, 3909 N. I-35

Flawn Academic Center (Undergrad Library) lobby, West Mall, UT campus

Travis Co. Courthouse, 1000 Guadalupe

ACC Campus, 1212 Rio Grande

ACC Business Ctr., 5930 Middle Fiskville

## **West**

Randalls, 2303 RR 620 S.

Randalls, 3300 Bee Caves Rd.

Bee Cave City Hall, 4000 Galleria Pkwy.

Rollingwood Municipal Bldg., 403 Nixon (closed on weekend)

## **North**

Round Rock ISD Performing Arts Ctr., 5800 McNeil Dr. (closed Sunday)

Ben Hur Shriners Hall, 7811 Rockwood

ACC Northridge, 11928 Stonehollow

## **Northwest**

Randalls, 10900-D Research

HEB, 7301 FM 620 N. (*temporary building in parking lot*)

## **Northeast**

MT Supermarket, 10901 N. Lamar (M-Sat., 10am-7pm; Sun., noon-6pm)

County Tax Office, 15822 Foothill Farms Loop (just off Pecan Street), Pflugerville

## **East**

Parque Zaragosa Rec. Ctr., 2608 Gonzales (M-F, 10am-7pm; Sat., 10am-5pm)

Northeast Health Ctr., 7112 Ed Bluestein #155 (Springdale Shopping Ctr.)

## **South**

Travis Co. Juvenile Probation Dept. Annex, 2501 S. Congress

Randalls, 2025 W. Ben White

ACC South Austin, 1820 W. Stassney

## **SOUTHEAST**

Dan Ruiz Public Library, 1600 Grove (M-F, 10am-7pm; Sat., 10am-5pm)

Fiesta Mart, 5510 S. I-35

ACC Riverside Campus, 1020 Grove

## **Southwest**

ACC Pinnacle, 7748 Hwy. 290 W.

Randalls, 6600 MoPac S.

Randalls, 9911 Brodie

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## **MOBILE VOTING**

### **Monday, April 28**

NW Rural Comm. Ctr., 18649 FM 1431, Jonestown, 10am-6pm

William B. Travis Bldg., 1701 Congress, 8am-6pm

Sam Houston Bldg., 201 E. 14th, 8am-6pm

Town Lake Center, 721 Barton Springs, 9am-noon

Heartland Health Care Ctr., 11406 Rustic Rock, 2-5pm

### **tuesday, April 29**

NW Rural Comm. Ctr., 18649 FM 1431, Jonestown, 10am-6pm

Manor ISD Admin. Bldg., 312 Murray, 10am-6pm

Central Services Bldg., 1711 San Jacinto, 8am-6pm

Heatherwilde Assisted Living, 401 S. Heatherwilde, Pflugerville, 2-5pm

Westminster Manor, 4100 Jackson, 9am-noon

### **wednesday, April 30**

Manor ISD Admin. Bldg., 312 Murray, 10am-6pm

Lago Vista City Hall, 5803 Thunderbird, 9am-6pm

Better Business Bureau, 1005 La Posada, 9am-6pm

Austin State Hospital, 4110 Guadalupe, 8am-noon

Continental Retirement Community, 4604 S. Lamar, 2-5pm

### **Thursday, May 1**

NW Rural Comm. Ctr., 18649 FM 1431, Jonestown, 10am-6pm

Southwest Keys Program, 6002 Jain, 9am-6pm

RBJ Residential Tower, 21 Waller St., 9am-noon

Lakeside Senior Center, 85 Trinity, 2-5pm

St. Edward's Univ., 3001 S. Congress, 9am-noon

ARCH, 500 E. Seventh, 2-4pm

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