

Candidate Questionnaire: City of Austin City Council Race 2014

**Mike Martinez**

1. Many farmers and artisan food producers tell us that their biggest challenge is navigating the regulatory maze. **Do you support reforms at the health department such as simplifying the regulations imposed on local producers and creating an omnibudsman position to help producers understand the requirements?**

Yes

No

Comments:

I do support reforms, and my office has worked with the Sustainable Food Policy Board, Farmer's Market managers, and local producers to clarify the temporary food establishment permits, food handler requirements, and farmers' market definitions. We have some state limitations, but we can certainly do more at the local level interpreting those in the most beneficial ways for our local food community members. I am proud to

have initiated the creation of the Sustainable Food Policy Board with the County and helped create the Community Gardens Coordinator position and the Food Policy Program Manager position at the City of Austin. I believe this last position currently can and does serve as ombudsman or liaison for local producers, but am happy to find additional resources to support our local food system as it continues to grow and prosper.

2. While local, sustainable foods have gained a reputation for being higher priced than conventional foods, that is not always the case. And, even when the food is higher priced, it reflects higher production costs that the farmers pay in order to raise food in ways that are environmentally friendly and on a small scale. The result is that profit margins for our local farmers are tiny. Yet the City of Austin has some of the highest permit fees in the state for producers selling at farmers' markets. **Do you support reducing fees to support small-scale local farmers and food producers?**

Yes

No

Comments:

*I agree that the fees are high and present a significant challenge for our local producers. The current fees were the result of discussions with the Health Department to get an accurate representation of their costs to conduct inspections. We made progress, but I believe we need to continue to impress upon them the importance of keeping these services affordable while ensuring the safety of local food. We should continue to evaluate the actual and necessary time to conduct inspections to identify where we can find cost savings. I would also look at simplifying the administrative process for permitting to further reduce the time and costs for producers.*

3. Access to land is another major challenge for people seeking to bring back locally raised foods. **Do you support measures to improve access to land for growing food, such as allowing public property to be used for nonprofit community gardens and working with County officials to reduce property tax burdens on small urban farmers?**

Yes

No

Comments:

*I sponsored the resolution directing the City Manager to identify city properties suitable for use by the public for community gardens and urban farms. I also worked with the Austin Water Utility to waive water meter tap fees and allow sub-metering to reduce the up-front costs for community gardens and urban farms. There was a great deal of discussion at the State Legislature to give counties greater flexibility for reducing the requirements for agricultural exemptions, which I fully support and will ask my colleagues to add to our legislative agenda. I will continue to look for innovative ways for the City to partner with our local food community to expand opportunities for this growing movement.*

4. Sustainable farming methods allowed under the city's code provide not only nutritious food, but also support a clean, healthy environment for our communities. Selling locally raised food provides income (either the primary income or supplemental) for growers, improves access to healthy local foods for consumers, and promotes local economic development. **Do you support people's ability to grow food and sell food in residential areas, subject to reasonable requirements (such as available parking) to protect neighbors' interests?**

Yes

No

Comments:

*Absolutely, and I am proud to have initiated the amendment to the Urban Farm Code to clarify what is allowable. Our urban farms help support a \$4 billion local food economy, and the Council should do all we can to help it grow and provide a bigger slice of our food system. The Urban Farm ordinance still needs much improvement to ensure we aren't stifling opportunities for our local farming community, and I'll continue to work with community advocates to identify ways we can improve this policy. I grew up on an urban farm (but that's not what they called back then. It was just our back yard) that helped feed my family and believe that living on or near farms not only increases access to healthy foods, it also improves overall quality of life.*

5. The interest in local foods goes beyond simply purchasing food. Re-connecting people with where and how their food is grown has many benefits. It promotes healthier eating; it creates transparency and encourages farmers to practice environmentally sound agriculture; it builds a sense of community and increased local economic development. An important aspect of rebuilding a local foods community is having people on farms for a wide range of events, including classes on cooking or canning; birthday parties for children that engage kids with their food; and weddings and other celebrations that recognize the vital role that food and our environment play in our lives. **Do you support urban farms' ability to host such events, subject to reasonable requirements (such as available parking and music restrictions) to protect neighbors' interests?**

Yes

No

Comments:

*I absolutely agree that our farms provide an amazing educational resource for our community. My favorite youth program is Urban Roots, and for the past two summers I've had an intern from their program work in my office. I am continually inspired by the students and believe the farm environment is a great place for everyone to understand where our food comes from and the benefits of fresh local produce. The farms also provide a beautiful setting for our community to come together and celebrate, and I fully support their use as event space.*