

## **Minutes from HNA regular meeting 3.17.21**

President Coan Dillahunty called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

The minutes from the January 20 and March 3 meetings were adopted.

Coan Dillahunty gave the treasurer's report in Bruce Fairchild's absence. The checking account balance, which began at \$4159.70 on January 20, now stands at \$4711.21 after the deposit of member dues. The money market account remains roughly the same at \$2509.45.

### **Parks Committee report from Carolyn Palaima:**

--After weather-related delays, the maintenance work on the trail around the golf course is going well and will wrap up around the end of March.

--The PARD online survey about the future of Hancock Golf Course opened March 9 and will close March 23. Everyone is encouraged to complete this survey.

[https://austinenergy.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_1Tyloojt1kmzAc6](https://austinenergy.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1Tyloojt1kmzAc6)

--PARD remains on the same timeline as Assistant Director of PARD Anthony Segura presented at our January meeting: PARD will make recommendations to the Parks Board in April, and the issue will be presented to City Council in May.

--Coan Dillahunty announced that the Executive Committee and Parks Committee held a joint meeting over the weekend to discuss components of a statement to put forward on behalf of HNA. This will allow the neighborhood to go on record in favor of some specific ideas about the golf course.

--On Wednesday, March 31, there will be a special meeting at which HNA members will be able to vote on specific elements of the statement. This statement will be posted to the website in advance. Following that meeting, the executive and parks committees will assemble the final draft of the statement to put forward to the city.

### **Transportation Committee:**

Coan Dillahunty announced that Natalie Niles Arguello attended the recent NCINC (North Central I-35 Neighborhood Coalition) meeting on behalf of HNA. TxDOT's second "virtual public scoping meeting" is open now through April 9 at 5 p.m. All Hancock residents should complete TxDOT's second survey, even if they took the first one.

<https://capexcentral.mobility35openhouse.com/>

### **There was no news from the Zoning Committee.**

**The remainder of the meeting was devoted to presentations for and against Proposition F**, one of eight propositions on the May ballot. Prop F changes the mayor's powers.

### **Andrew Allison of Austinites for Progressive Reform spoke for the proposal.**

This group is behind Prop F as well as Props D, E, G and H. Its goal is to make Austin government more "representative, responsible and accountable." Andrew stated that in an era of voter suppression, cities have a role to play to increase turnout and ensure representation. These ideas have all been tested and implemented in other cities.

--Prop D moves the mayoral election to presidential election years, when there's the highest and most diverse turnout.

--Prop E implements ranked-choice voting (if permitted by state law), which would eliminate expensive and low-turnout runoff elections.

--Prop G adds another single-member council district to keep up with Austin's growth.

--Prop H is a campaign finance reform measure that gives voters \$25 vouchers to contribute to city candidates of their choice. In Seattle, a similar program has increased the number of candidates who can run, diversified their donor bases, and led to increased voter turnout.

Prop F would "let voters and not politicians choose the person who leads the city." Right now Austin is one of the largest cities in the country with an unelected city manager who runs the executive branch of local government by setting daily policy, writing the budget and choosing department heads. Shifting some of these duties to an elected mayor would provide checks and balances. Prop F would make this person democratically accountable. The change would also remove powers from the mayor that are legislative in nature and retain them to the council.

### **Mason Ayer of Austin for All People spoke against the proposal.**

He said that Austin's success as one of the most desirable cities in the nation is due partly to the system of government we've had for decades; why would we want to change that?

Consolidating power in the hands of a single mayor elected to a four-year term is not the solution to the problems of voter suppression Andrew identified.

--Under Prop F, the mayor would have the ability to set council meetings but wouldn't be required to attend.

--Austin's shift to a 10-1, geographic district system in 2012 has expanded representation on council, and giving the mayor veto power over a council decision negates council members' voices. The 2/3 council vote required to override a mayoral veto is too high of a bar.

--A city manager is a professional trained to manage a very large budget. Putting that power in the hands of an elected official without that training is dangerous. If the mayor gets to appoint heads of all departments, there's a risk of him/her appointing friends or donors to those positions.

--Finally, Ayer asked, if this is a pro-democracy move, why are we voting on something so important in a historically low-turnout May election during a pandemic?

### **Q&A**

**Q.** What problem does a strong-mayor system solve? Can you give us a local scenario where a strong mayor would have been better equipped to handle the situation?

**Andrew:** Going to 10-1 was a great step forward, but it also exposed flaws in our city manager system. Several times over the past 5 years, council has voted unanimously on something, but what the council agrees on is not implemented, or is implemented slowly or late. It's as though the city manager has an "administrative veto," one for which there is no override. It's very rare for the council to fire the city manager, so in these situations, voters have little recourse.

**Q.** What is the worst-case scenario if Prop F passes? Walk us through a situation that could happen under a strong mayor that you think most voters would dislike.

**Mason:** It is rare for council to fire the city manager, but that person can be removed via a simple majority vote, or council can force her/his resignation. But with an unaccountable mayor, voters only have a chance to replace that person every four years. Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City all have strong mayors, and we don't want to be like them. Imagine that a political hack is elected mayor and is managing the budget and appointing department heads based on personal favor.

**Q.** I would appreciate hearing more from each side about how Prop F would impact racial equity in Austin. What specific ways could Prop F reduce or fail to reduce racial disparities in housing, health care, education and more?

**Andrew:** The clearest way to look at this is to look at who chooses the city manager today, and who would choose the mayor in the future. Currently the city manager is chosen by council and mayor, generally in a unanimous vote. We live in a city that is a majority people of color, but most council members come from majority-white and wealthier areas due to the city's history of segregation, so the "electorate" for the city manager is structurally unrepresentative of the city as a whole. Under Prop F, a much more diverse electorate would choose our chief executive via citywide vote.

**Mason:** We have made great progress on council diversity with the 10-1 system. A strong mayor has the potential to negate council's voice.

**Q.** If Austin changes to a strong-mayor system, the mayor will be responsible for administrative and budgetary tasks that the city manager currently handles. This seems like the mayor would need to be someone with executive management experience rather than, primarily, a political visionary. Can each group talk about the qualities you think are most important for a mayor to hold?

**Mason:** The City of Austin is like a big corporation, and to be effective the mayor would need some kind of background running a bureaucracy. City managers go to school for this; the idea is they operate outside of politics.

**Andrew:** The city isn't a corporation, it's a democracy, and we have to trust the voters. Right now we have the legislature (the council) choosing the executive (the city manager) rather than trusting the voters to choose the chief executive of the city. "Politics" is another word for voting, and we need leaders who are responsive to voters. The ideal qualities of a mayor will be what voters decide they should be, not what 11 people in a conference room decide.

**Q.** Both groups acknowledge the changes made by the shift to 10-1, so why would it be a good idea to give the mayor veto power over a council decision?

**Andrew:** It's a question of checks and balances. You can read on our website about the powers the mayor would lose under Prop F and how power would be split. Council would be able to override a mayoral veto, confirm appointments, have budget authority, and appoint the city auditor, who oversees the executive branch. The council and mayor both have checks over one another, like in our other American systems.

**Mason:** The 2/3 vote required for council to override a mayoral veto is a very high bar to reach.

**Q.** Do other peer cities with strong mayors all give the mayor veto power?

**Andrew:** Yes, every strong-mayor city with a population of more than 500,000 has a mayoral veto.

**Q.** The Code rewrite or Code Next2 has been very contentious with a great deal of citizen involvement. With a strong Mayor who appoints the head of Zoning and Planning commission what effect would that have on decision making on Code change?

**Mason:** We really don't know. I would hope the mayor would appoint someone with expertise in this area, but it could be a member of the good-old-boys' club. Also, the code rewrite is one of the biggest changes our city has experienced in decades, and there have been many opportunities for citizen input. Changing to a strong-mayor system is at least as big a change, but there hasn't been the same level of community input.

**Andrew:** The elected mayor would appoint the head of the department (which the unelected city manager does currently). The mayor would lose the ability to appoint someone to the Planning Commission, which would be replaced by the appointee from the new 11<sup>th</sup> district. Ultimately any

land development code or zoning change has to pass through council as an ordinance – the mayor can't pass that on his/her own.

**Q.** Why is there no provision requiring the City Council confirm any department head nominees to be confirmed with a majority vote?

**Andrew:** Today, the city attorney is appointed by the unelected city manager. In our proposal the mayor picks the city attorney, who must then be confirmed by council. The council could also remove and replace that person (a power council does not have today). Currently, public safety chiefs are confirmed by council and department heads are not. Under Prop F that would stay the same; we don't want to change too much at once.

**Q.** How does Austin for All People stand on Propositions D, E, G and H?

**Mason:** We aren't taking a position on those.

**Q.** Proposition H would create a public campaign finance program in which every registered voter gets two \$25 vouchers to contribute to the city candidates of their choice. Where does the money for "Democracy Dollars" come from?

**Andrew:** The total cost would be less than \$850,000 per year from the general fund. This was originally recommended by the 2018 appointed Charter Review Commission, but it was never put on the ballot, so we revived it. This would replace the current public finance system, which only provides financing in runoffs, so the money that currently goes toward that program could go toward offsetting this – if we implement ranked-choice voting, we can eliminate runoffs.

**Closing statements:**

**Mason:** We have seen strong opposition to Prop F from a wide range of groups, including both labor and the Real Estate Council of Austin as well as environmental groups. May will be a low-turnout election to decide something this important. For more information: [austinforallpeople.org](http://austinforallpeople.org).

**Andrew:** We have to examine the origins of our current city manager system, which was implemented in the 1920s largely at the behest of Monroe Shipe to serve his own business interests. One of the first policies to emerge from the new system was the segregationist 1928 city plan. "In these days we should be examining where our systems come from, and if our systems have questionable origins, we should be questioning whether we should be keeping them at all." For more information: [austinprogress.org](http://austinprogress.org).

Coan Dillahunty adjourned the meeting at 8:06 pm.