

Thanks.

As our new city manager, among others, has recently made plain in asking for direction from the Austin City Council, public policy is not neutral. It produces winners and losers. It is the context and contour of local politics that determines who those winners and losers are.

Our group gathered last year on Martin Luther King Day at the Montopolis Negro School to announce the “People’s Plan” a bottom-up and sensible proposal to combat displacement and to help mitigate gentrification. We are gathered here today, on the 51st anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination, to furnish a “State of the People’s Plan,” a one-year assessment of whether and how our proposals have been adopted by our political leaders.

To refresh your memory, the People’s Plan consists of six resolutions:

1. Establishment of a distinct Low Income Housing Trust Fund.
2. Enactment of a right to remain or return program.
3. Implementation of East Austin conservation and historic districts.
4. Utilization of city owned land to create 2000 low-income housing units.
5. Establishment of interim land restrictions in East Austin to address flooding and other environmental concerns.
6. Enactment of a local Environmental Quality Review program that would measure cumulative as well as environmental justice impacts.

Each resolution was carefully crafted by a dedicated, distinguished and experienced group of diverse Austinites and was designed to be Targeted, Simple and Actionable—TSA for short. We spoke to dozens of community leaders, planners, colleagues and friends in other cities in Texas and across the United States to learn what works there and what might work in Austin.

Last April the Austin City Council passed a resolution directing the city’s staff to take a look at our proposals and to report back by August 31st. Staff did not report back by the deadline, primarily because the city council had tasked it with facilitating the move of an MLS soccer franchise from Columbus, Ohio to Austin instead. Once that was accomplished, during September and October, staff inside the city’s Neighborhood Housing department and the Equity Office began reaching out to us, and we met with them to discuss the details of the People’s Plan in October.

So what has been the outcome of these discussions? What grade do we give the city council? Answer: F. In April, 2019, we do not have a low income housing trust fund, we do not have an environmental quality control program, we do not have a systematized approach to creating conservation and historic districts in East Austin, we have not created 2000 units of low income housing units built on city owned land, we have not implemented interim land restrictions, and we do not have a right to remain or return program.

The fact that the council busied itself with the giveaway of public assets that had been identified as the number one site in the city for affordable housing construction in order to facilitate a billionaire professional soccer team owner instead, while scores of homesteading families were being displaced in our city, signifies clearly where this council’s priorities lie. *None* of the council-members have undertaken a serious intellectual engagement with the People’s Plan, which is why they also have not engaged it at a political level.

Until the city council comes to proper terms with the scale of the unacceptability of our affordability and displacement crisis, and commits itself to serious policies that allow families to stay in their homes, we will continue to agitate for serious political and policy reforms on behalf of the people, not special interests. Because the people closest to the pain should be closest to the power.