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Point Austin: Here They Come!

As the leaves turn, the air fills with ... candidates

By Michael King

I know you're all waiting breathlessly for the Nov. 6 state election, when you'll get your chance to vote *for* or *against* cancer and to engage in popular democracy over such riveting propositions as: "The constitutional amendment to abolish the constitutional authority for the office of inspector of hides and animals." Before I use my franchise up on that one, I want to know whose ox is being gored.

We'll return to that ritual flogging (and its 15 brethren) later. In the meantime, with Monday's *Statesman* outing of Randi Shade – ventriloquized by Shade consultant Mark Nathan – as the first announced opponent to Place 3 City Council incumbent Jennifer Kim, we've officially entered a campaign of much greater local moment: next spring's City Council election, scheduled for May 10. That means the 180-days-out kickoff fundraising/spending date is mid-November, leaving roughly a month for potential candidates to sound out support (financial and otherwise), put together a staff (especially an official treasurer), and finally decide if they are looking or leaping.

Three seats will be on the ballot: Kim's Place 3, Place 1 (Lee Leffingwell), and the open Place 4 seat, to be vacated by term-limited Mayor Pro Tem Betty Dunkerley. Place 4 is already in play, with Laura Morrison of the Austin Neighborhoods Council facing off against former council aide Robin Cravey of the Friends of Barton Springs. Morrison and Cravey went public some weeks ago (see *Chronicle* profiles of Morrison, May 25, and Cravey, June 8) and are already ubiquitous at public events. There's some buzz that another name or two may drop into the Place 4 mix. I've been told that development consultant Amelia Lopez-Phelps, formerly of Lopez-Phelps and Associates, is looking at this race, but several calls to her new gig – MWM Design Group – where she is a principal, were unreturned.

Almost equally coy was planning commissioner and Galindo Group (real estate, etc.) scion Cid Galindo, who told me this week he is "considering" a council run but is not yet ready to talk about it – even to identify a potential seat. "I'm thinking about it," he said, "and when I decide, I'll talk about it."

Shade & Meeker

Shade tipped her personal balance to run over the weekend; as recently as Friday, she had not yet firmly decided. "I was trying to make sure I had the broad support and my family's support to make the campaign," she told me. (She has a 16-month-old son with her partner, attorney Kayla Shell.) She's been involved in politics since her days as University of Texas student body president and established and then ran the state's AmeriCorps program under former Govs. Ann Richards and George W. Bush. In 1999 she started a Web-based business, CharityGift.com, which she sold, later bought back, and sold again to Kintera a couple of years ago. Asked why she decided to challenge Kim, she said simply, "I just believe we can do better."

With a similar conviction, Responsible Growth for Northcross spokesman Jason Meeker says he's likely to

challenge Place 1 incumbent Leffingwell. "I'm not ready to make a firm decision yet, before the lawsuit goes to trial Nov. 13," Meeker said. (RG4N has sued the city over its permitting of a Wal-Mart Supercenter at the former Northcross Mall.) "But as I've been telling friends," he continued with a laugh, "I've cut my hair in order to look more respectable." Meeker's a copywriter and public-relations consultant with his own agency (Jason Meeker Communications: "Jason's my name, and copywriting is my game") and says: "I don't see [Leffingwell] as being an effective council member for many people in Austin, nor a mayor in 2009. I intend to put him through the rigors of a healthy campaign."

Spelman & Goodman

With the actual filing date not until Feb. 9, more candidates are likely to surface. At an even longer distance – the 2009 race to succeed term-limited Mayor Will Wynn – the field has already begun to get crowded. Leffingwell and Place 5 colleague Brewster McCracken have made it clear that they're both very interested in the job. And in the wake of persistent buzz, this week former Council Member Bill Spelman told me he is indeed planning to run for mayor; a couple of days later, former member and Mayor Pro Tem Jackie Goodman told me she "intends to run," as well.

Spelman served one term (1997-2000), declining to run for re-election in 2000. ("I had three full-time jobs: teaching in the LBJ school, directing a federal grant, and the council – something had to give.") He says among several issues, his primary motivation – the "one big thing" – is the council's inability or unwillingness to deal with the too-rapid growth that is overwhelming the city's infrastructure and services. "I hear people saying the city will double in size again in 20 years," he noted. "Don't we have anything to say about that? If we don't act now, we're on the road to become another Houston or Los Angeles." Asked what he might do to control growth, he responded, "Well, the simplest thing is to stop paying people to come here." He acknowledged that he might have supported the largest city incentive package, the 2005 Samsung deal – "The Samsung fab represented the next [technical] generation in our core industry, so it's a difficult question." But overall, he believes the current council has failed to adequately address the "core problem": unrestrained, unmanaged growth.

Goodman, who served from 1991 to 2005, says several reasons underlie her current plan to run, ranging from diverse economic-development issues to the lack of city support for "the creative industry" (arts, music, etc.). More broadly, she said, "Too many things have been left out of this council's consensus building." She emphasized specifically her belief that many policy decisions have been delegated or abandoned to decision-makers (i.e., city staff) "outside council" – "matters that should be strictly under council purview."

So that's your current municipal election menu – as the weeks go by, we'll have much more to say about the available specials.

If you're thinking of running for City Council – or just want to beat your designated single issue into the ground – drop Point Austin a line at mking@austinchronicle.com.

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