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An Uncertain Hand

A pair of wild cards in Place 3

By Katherine Gregor

What do you think of Jennifer Kim?

The Place 3 City Council contest has become a referendum on the first-term performance of the incumbent. Concerns expressed about Kim focus less on her positions and more on her "me-first" style. The issue that could decide the race: Does Kim retain any political legs to stand on to be effective in another term?

Prime challenger Randi Shade has said she decided to challenge the incumbent because she heard widespread dissatisfaction with Kim's accessibility, collegiality on the dais, and job performance. Shade's campaign refrain: "We can do better." At candidate forums around town in recent weeks and on her campaign website (www.randishade.com), Shade stresses her own people skills in unflattering contrast to Kim. Shade's message: To get things done, you have to work well with others; I do, and Kim does not.

Those criticisms have sparked feisty retorts from Kim, who says she's learned from her mistakes (though she doesn't itemize them) and spunkily defends her own job performance. "I have a strong voting record of being pro-neighborhood, pro-environment, and pro-small business," she states on her website (www.standingupforaustin.com). In brief, it's true. On the campaign trail, Kim has come across as smart, poised, articulate, and well-versed on policy details. She's a voice for thirtysomething women and the first Asian-American on council – reason enough to keep her around for some voters. By contrast, Shade's campaign persona has been warmer, more open, and down-to-earth; she talks about her most recent stint as an at-home mom more often than her Harvard MBA.

Not viable as a candidate is third-runner Ken Weiss. He lacks an identifiable base of support, exudes no charisma on the stump, and has raised virtually no campaign funds. At press time, his bare-bones website (www.weissforplace3.com) had no content other than a plea for money. He says his difficulties with city staff over business regulations moved him to run for office. His declared views on the issues are middle-of-the-road and his solutions vague; in forums he touts support for environmental protection and small businesses and disdain for toll roads. The job qualifications he cites include a long tenure in Austin, experience running small family businesses, Texas Army National Guard service, and "has been married for over five years." In this day and age, that is a major accomplishment!

Kim's Record

In truth, on the issues, Shade and Kim are more alike than dissimilar. Kim's voting record shows that her council votes have been generally well-aligned with the concerns and values of Austin as a community. In that

sense, she's been a good representative. Her main campaign talking points: keeping Austin affordable, protecting the environment, protecting neighborhoods, keeping Austin livable, and keeping Austin economically vibrant. Local hot buttons, to be sure. Shade's stated priorities: growth that prioritizes public benefits, equal opportunity, fighting poverty, a city government that welcomes and taps citizen activism, reaching out to Austinites.

"I will actively seek your input, rather than relying on you to visit me, and you will continue to see me at meetings, town halls, and community forums after I am elected, not just while I am campaigning," Shade has said, taking a swipe at Kim's recent upsurge in voter love. "I see accessibility as the most important aspect of a council member's job. I decided to challenge the incumbent in Place 3 specifically because of her reputation for inaccessibility. The best way to change the perception that City Hall is not listening to citizens is to prove that perception wrong through action."

Some left-leaning groups around town do think Kim has been listening. She's won the endorsements of the Sierra Club, Central Labor Council, and hardcore progs like Gus Garcia, Brigid Shea, and Robin Rather. "She has been there for us when we needed her, and she has taken initiative on behalf of the working people," said Jack Kirfman, a board member of the Central Labor Council. "Jennifer has been responsive to our concerns."

Kim has shown she's not afraid to disagree with – and even publicly criticize – her council colleagues, which has sparked some lively debates on a council sometimes prone to inaction or safe unanimous votes. On affordable housing, for example, she recently pushed council to amend its vision for redevelopment of the Downtown Green Water Treatment Plant site. Kim listened to community advocates, then advocated for their concerns; as a result, the city's request for proposals from master developers requires affordable housing.

On the other hand: While Kim's stump speech always cites her sponsorship of the Affordable Housing Incentives Task Force as a top accomplishment, the recommendations produced by the task force did not provide a sound community solution. Some members were disappointed in her lack of hands-on involvement; for example, she didn't get advocates the housing market data necessary to support higher developer contributions. Then she let the Downtown recommendations languish for nearly a year (to the frustration of task force members) without council action; amid ambivalence from both staff and community advocates, council chose not to adopt them permanently.

Why don't Kim's bright ideas translate into power on the council? This gets to the heart of the Jennifer Kim problem. In strategic terms, all council action is a team sport. To actually make a difference for citizens, a council member must build relationships, allies, and supportive coalitions – both in the community and at City Hall. Shade has accurately pointed out Kim's weakness in this area; as a council member, she has alienated many, starting with the colleagues she needs to get a resolution passed. As a result, much of the smart campaign money around town, and some key endorsements – notably, the firefighters, police association, and EMS workers – have moved from Kim to Shade.

An attentive reading of council dynamics over the past year makes it clear that Kim has lost the full trust and respect of her colleagues. She has a track record of repeatedly letting them down, blindsiding them, switching her vote unannounced – sometimes even as they're sitting on the dais. Her unpredictable shifts on policy votes have made Kim an undesirable co-sponsor for initiatives; no one can count on her to stay the course, as she's shown she may suddenly flip on an issue. As Shade suggests, Kim's "blowing in the wind" positions often appear motivated by self-interest or winning votes at the polls rather than deeply held convictions. Kim has been lead sponsor or co-sponsor on few successful policies of real substance. At this point, Kim herself has diluted the power of her council vote, because no one can count on it, in counting to four ... the number of votes required make policy. In the City Hall version of seven-card stud, Kim's colleagues must reach for a full house, because they can't safely bet on four-of-a-kind. Having thus isolated herself, how can Kim be effective in a second term?

In the Shade

These problems have led many voters to take a serious look at newcomer Shade – who seems to have a yard sign on every block in town. According to the Burnt Orange Report, an April 16 IVR Poll of 517 likely City Council voters showed Shade just ahead of Kim; each had about 25% of the vote, with 11% for Weiss, and 37% still undecided.

A UT Plan II grad and 18-year Austinite who lives in Clarksville, Shade has been successful as a high tech entrepreneur and a nonprofit executive director. In 2007 she graduated from the Aspen Institute's Henry Crown Fellowship Program – which prepares civic leaders for community-minded public service. Although Shade is at home in the business world, her involvements have all tied back to community needs. Her long service record earned her the coveted Austin Under 40 community service award in 2003.

A theme running through her professional career: driving corporate dollars to community nonprofits to help those in need. Her company Charitygift was a Robin Hood endeavor; it provided a vehicle for companies to "gift" their corporate friends with charitable contributions instead of the usual holiday fruit-and-cheese basket. As executive director of the Austin Entrepreneurs Foundation, she worked to set aside high tech company equity for community giving. It's not surprising then that one Shade campaign platform plank addresses how the city of Austin (and public safety) should work more closely with local nonprofits (and their donors) to help bring people out of poverty.

As the polished incumbent, Kim has excelled at campaign appearances. She can be both impressive and charming in person. By contrast, newcomer Shade is still a political amateur who's blurry on the talking points. Some observers who have seen her speak at numerous candidate forums report they still don't have a clear fix on how Shade would vote as a council member. Like the *Chronicle*, groups such as the West Austin Democrats and Better Austin Today have had a hung jury on whether to endorse Kim or Shade. Such ambivalence makes it hard to predict the outcome in this race and could even depress voter turnout – unless one candidate plays late-hand aces.

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