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Kim's office expenses draw flak from council opponent

Council member says Shade is nit-picking to distract from other issues.

By [Sarah Coppola](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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A digital camera, a "survival lantern," velvet Christmas stockings and Vera Wang glassware are among the items that Austin City Council Member Jennifer Kim has bought with the office money she's allotted.

One of Kim's re-election opponents, Randi Shade, says those purchases and others show that Kim has not been responsible with taxpayers' money.

"I'm not saying that what she's done is illegal or violates city policy, but it is inappropriate and excessive," said Shade, who obtained Kim's office expenses through an open records request.

Former National Guard officer Ken Weiss is also running against Kim in the May 10 election.

Kim said all of the items have a city purpose and are city property, not items she keeps for personal use. She also notes that she has stayed within her office budget each year since being elected in 2005.

Shade's criticism is "piddly stuff," Kim said. "She knows nothing about the city budget and is also trying to create a distraction from the issue of who is supporting her campaign."

Kim has criticized Shade for accepting campaign donations from people who support toll roads and the Domain subsidies package, which Kim opposes.

Council members are each given about \$260,000 a year to spend on office expenses such as staff salaries, supplies and business travel.

City rules say they can't use the money for political or personal purposes, and each expense is reviewed and approved by a city budget officer, city spokesman Gene Acuña said.

A 2007 American-Statesman review of all the council members' office expenses found that Kim spent more than her colleagues — \$19,822 not including salaries — in 2005-06.

The list Shade got from the city was more detailed because the city now records council expenses more

specifically, Acuña said.

In the first 2½ years of her term, Kim has spent her office money on items such as a \$450 air purifier, a Steam Wizard vacuum, a TV/VCR, a Pottery Barn pomegranate wreath and 20 copies of the book "Now, Discover Your Strengths."

Kim also traveled to 22 cities, including a \$1,248, three-night stay at a W Hotel in Manhattan. Kim paid \$1,200 for Continental Airlines' Presidents Club passes to have access to a private clubroom area at airports. She said she wanted to be able to conduct city business such as phone calls and e-mails in a quiet place.

Kim said her trips were all for city business such as conferences and board meetings for the National League of Cities, of which she's a member. The Manhattan trip was to visit the city's central library and meet with representatives of foundations to discuss affordable housing, community development and Austin's plans for a central library, she said.

Kim also spent \$636 for a 2005 overnight retreat and work session for herself and her aides at The Crossings, an upscale conference and spa facility in northwestern Travis County. The staff did not partake of spa treatments and was there to discuss policy and team-building priorities, Kim said.

Records show that Kim reimbursed the city for the Christmas stockings, office decoration items from Pottery Barn and Crate & Barrel and \$104 for the New York trip.

Kim also bought four books from the communications firm run by her former boss, state Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo. The books include "How to Roast a Friend" and one about how Laredo's mayor and council operate. She said she wanted to brush up on city governance issues such as open meetings and agenda rules.

Kim explained some of her other purchases this way:

Vera Wang glasses: She wanted to serve water to office visitors in glasses rather than using environmentally harmful plastic bottles.

Air purifier: She wanted to create a healthy, allergy-free office for her staff and visitors.

Survival lantern: She bought this after Hurricane Katrina to prepare for possible emergencies; the lantern has battery-free radio and a hand crank.

Digital camera: She wanted to record special events hosted by the city or her office.

Shade said she would post her office expenses online, something none of the council members does now.


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