

Candidates debate ecological issues

*Samantha Deavin
Daily Texan Staff*

The 2009 mayoral candidates took questions on their plans to assist local sustainability efforts Wednesday night at a forum held at Austin City Hall. The forum was hosted by Texas Green Network, an organization aimed at accelerating the spread of environmental responsibility in mainstream business practices, and brought to the forefront the issue of sustainability and environmental policy in this year's elections. Mayor Pro Tem Brewster McCracken, Councilman Lee Leffingwell, real estate broker David Buttross and writer Josiah Ingalls participated in the debate and answered questions regarding sustainable business, the local food economy, renewable energy resources and research initiatives.

Paul Severin, Director of the Texas Green Network, said the forum was important in exposing the candidates' positions on sustainable business in Austin. Mayoral candidate Carole Keeton Strayhorn did not attend the debate. "The level of response, participation and policies communicated in the debate reflect how well the candidates will service the community on sustainability issues," Severin said.

Candidates' policies and priorities differed significantly. McCracken, who is heavily involved in the clean energy grid Pecan Street Project, focused on the need for solar energy and green-collar jobs, while Leffingwell advocated recycling and water conservation. Buttross suggested tackling Austin's local food problem on a commercial scale, while education and a citizen-based approach formed the backbone of Ingalls' argument.

Katari Grassell, marketing coordinator of EcoNetworking and a community gardener, said the green movement is the most important economic indicator in the election.

"It's important for us to have a green-minded mayor who has our best interests at heart," she said. "We have made inroads in the last few years, but there is so much more to be done."

Grassell said she is concerned with the maintenance of Austin's tree life, since the city's tree coverage has dropped from 40 percent to 20 percent in the last 10 years.

"It's a balancing act between increasing the city's density, lowering our carbon emissions and keeping the lakes, trees and parks that make Austin special," she said.

Austin EcoNetwork founder Brandi Clark said the importance of the issue rests on the awareness of environmental sustainability.

"President [Barack] Obama is installing an organic garden on the White House Lawn, which, amongst other factors, has helped spark a new national focus on sustainability issues," Clark said.

Grassell is pleased that the mayoral candidates brought unique perspectives to the table.

"I agree with some and disagree with others," she said. "But it's important that we have mayoral candidates with diverse opinions."

The municipal election will take place May 9.



*Lara Haase/The Daily Texan
From left to right, mayoral hopefuls Josiah Ingalls, Lee Leffingwell and Brewster McCracken answer questions concerning green issues that the city faces at a forum sponsored by Texas Green Network on Wednesday.*