

ANC Happenings for the First Quarter 2009

ANC Representative: Kristin Harrison, Kristin.diane.harrison@gmail.com

- **January:** Sara Hensley, New Director for Parks and Recreation
- **February:** Rhonda Mae Kerr, New Chief of Fire and Rescue
- **March:** Candidate's Forum

JANUARY MEETING: Sara Hensley, new director for PARD

News: February 6, 2009

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ANC: Do More With Less

By Katherine Gregor

A double-bill attraction of City Manager **Marc Ott** and new Parks & Recreation Department Director **Sara Hensley** brought a standing-room-only crowd to last week's **Austin Neighborhoods Council** meeting. Ott gave a sobering talk about the city of Austin's looming **budget shortfall**, emphasizing that the cuts now necessitated by shrinking municipal revenues aren't just about finding "fat" but rather will require cutting painfully into "muscle." He let city of Austin Chief Financial Officer **Leslie Browder** present the depressing details: "Impact of Recession on 2009 Budget." For 2008, the city made \$8 million in spending cuts necessitated by lower sales-tax revenue; for 2009, a \$25 million budget gap is projected, requiring more than \$20 million in additional cuts. If city revenues from sales tax and development fall even lower than projected, the surgery could get bloodier for both 2009 and 2010. Still, Ott pointed out, many cities have it far worse.

Ott then asked for ideas from the crowd for ways to save on city spending. In response he heard a "greatest hits" list of ANC members' hot-button complaints. Among the

suggestions: **Domain subsidies** (stop them), the **animal shelter** (don't build a new one), **Water Treatment Plant No. 4** (don't build it), the **Riverside Boardwalk** (don't build it), **parks and libraries** (fund them anyway).

After Ott departed with his entourage, an upbeat Hensley transformed the energy in the room. She spoke of initiating interdepartmental cooperation on a new comprehensive plan for trails in Austin (with Public Works Director **Howard Lazarus** and Transportation Director **Rob Spillar**). She's pursuing collaborative efforts with Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Director **Margaret Shaw** and Neighborhood Planning and Zoning Director **Greg Guernsey** (who also attended) for projects such as new "pocket parks" for parkless neighborhoods. She's already read and forwarded recommendations for expanded parks facilities from the "Families & Children Task Force Report." She's asked **Roger Duncan** at Austin Energy to use PARD as a city pilot program for buying only electric, eco-conscious mowers, blowers, and vehicles. She wants to reduce her vehicle fleet – and put her staff on bicycles and scooters. ("Wow!" was one spontaneous response.)

Hensley asked the ANC crowd for suggestions and responded enthusiastically to every one – then gave out her e-mail and phone number. (All contact info for city staff is available by calling 311.) Predictably, folks asked for more services, more parks and facilities, better maintenance, and longer hours. Hensley offered to send PARD staff out to gather input and solve problems at neighborhood association meetings. The ANC crowd clearly was knocked out by her openness and responsiveness. Said ANC President **Danette Chimenti** pointedly in closing, "It was very refreshing to hear from our new Parks director!"

There was only one problem: a total disconnect between all the new goodies that ANC members want and the presentation they'd just heard on the grim realities of the city budget.

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FEBRUARY MEETING: Rhonda Mae Kerr, new Fire Chief

City of Austin's new fire chief

[City of Austin's new fire chief](#)

Written by Mark Collins Friday, 27 February 2009

Rhoda Mae Kerr

Rhoda Mae Kerr - Photo courtesy City of Austin

Hometown: Ringwood, N.J.

Education: Bachelor's degree from William Patterson University; master's degree from Florida International University

Years of fire experience: 25 years

First day of service in Austin: Feb. 2, 2009

Contact: 974-0140 or firepio@ci.austin.tx.us

What got you into fighting fires?

At the time I was teaching high school physical education and I knew I was looking for a new career. I wanted something that was dynamic, challenging and had room for upward mobility. I met this guy in the fire service, and I thought to myself, 'I can do this.' At the time there were very few women in the fire service, and I thought, 'What a great time to get in if I have these aspirations to move up.' So I did. I got into the training academy, and after about two weeks I went, 'Gosh, I've found my niche.' I absolutely loved it. Interestingly enough, I am a fourth-generation firefighter. It was in my blood; it just took a while to percolate.

What prompted you to transition to administration and was it difficult?

Yes, no, maybe. My goal early on was to be a chief of a large metropolitan department. I knew that if I wanted to move up through the ranks, I needed to make sure I had broad experiences, because when you are the chief you are an administrator. You are now the CEO.



What drew you to Austin?

There were several cities I kind of looked at. I like the sense of Austin, even though I hadn't been here. It's a well-respected department, a good department. The Austin position just came about at the right time, and the rest is history. I met with different community members and leaders, and it was just the right fit. This is the pinnacle of my career and the realization of all my hopes and dreams.

What kind of an honor is it to be named the first female fire chief in the City of Austin's history?

It's a great honor. It's exciting that I'm opening that door one more time. The part of it that's exciting is that I hope I open the door so that others can follow. I think it is important that I give back in that regard, that I go to public events, that I work with other people. Yes, I want more women to be successful, but I want everyone who wants to achieve a goal to work hard for it.

What kind of new things will you bring to your role?

The department isn't broken, I'm not here to fix a broken organization. I'm here to lead a tremendous organization into the future. Will we do some things differently? I'm sure we will. I think that any organization that doesn't think they can always improve is a stagnant organization. One thing I would like to work on is brand identity. I'm all about branding and visioning and having a brand statement. I think that's one of the things I'd like to work on.

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the Austin Fire Department?

I think the biggest challenge facing all of us is the economy, and how do we re-tool to work through this crisis. How do we not compromise service but still be a part of helping the city get through an economic downturn? Another challenge that not only the fire department faces, but every department, is workforce issues. Where are people going to come from? The department of labor statistics say there will be 31 million more jobs than workers by 2020. Where are all those people going to come from and how do we recruit and what do we look for? Can we maintain some diversity and be a close-knit group? Those are our two challenges; hopefully one is short term and the other is long term.

What can citizens of Austin do to help the fire department?

I have a saying that I adopted, which is 'everyone goes home.' I've taken that to mean not only everyone in the fire department, but I think it transcends to the community that you want to go home as well. If all of the citizens will use good care in regard to several things like putting on their seat belt, driving slower and using good fire practices, then that's one less risk the firefighters are responding to.

APRIL MEETING: Candidate Forum

Responses to ANC Questionnaire: <http://ancweb.org/>

Twelve candidates file for Austin City Council positions

For immediate release

March 9, 2009

Austin voters will find four contested races and one candidate unopposed when they go to the polls for the May 9, 2009, combined municipal general election and Place 1 special election.

Early voting begins April 27.

Mayor

- David A. Buttross, 39, real estate investor
- Josiah James Ingalls, 28, a Hilton houseperson
- Lee Leffingwell, 69, Austin City Council Member
- Brewster McCracken, 43, Attorney (Austin City Council Member)
- Carole Keeton Strayhorn, 69, founder and president of Our Texas Grandchildren Foundation

Place 1

- Perla Cavazos, 33, listed occupation as "candidate"
- Chris Riley, 44, attorney

Place 2

- Mike Martinez, 39, Austin City Council Member
- Jose Quintero Sr., 57, sales representative

Place 5

Bill Spelman, 51, college professor.

Place 6

- Sheryl Cole, 44, Austin City Council Member
- Sam Osemene, 35, Austin Community College teacher

The drawing for ballot positions will be at 10 a.m. March 11 in the Boards and Commissions Room at Austin City Hall. Mayor and Council terms are three years. Two years are left in the term of Place 1 being vacated by Leffingwell.

A Possible Partner for Neighborhood: Sustainable Neighborhoods of North Central Austin

The **North Central Austin Candidate Forum**, sponsored by the Allandale, Brentwood, Crestview, Highland, North Shoal Creek, and Wooten neighborhood associations, is the day after Easter, **Monday April 13**, from 6:30 PM to 9:00 PM, Wozniak Hall, St Louis Catholic Church, 7601 Burnet Rd.(snaustin.org)

The neighborhoods identified city planning as a unifying theme of the forum. Candidates will be asked detailed questions on how to plan for and fund the land use and transportation changes in North Central Austin required to support tens of thousands of new residents in the coming years.

The City in 2007 rezoned hundreds of acres of commercial property along Burnet, Anderson, Lamar and Airport to allow for apartments, with no hard requirement other than sidewalks for what planners call functional public open space - plazas, playscapes, outdoor dining, trails, parks and wildlife habitat - each of which serves a vital purpose in a dense urban environment.

"You need these kinds of features to make urban residential districts liveable, pedestrian-and transit-friendly, resilient to decline once the shine is off the brick," said Steven Zettner, who belongs to a New Urbanist advocacy group, SNAustin.org, aligned with the neighborhoods.

Zettner compared 2nd Street District near City Hall, slated for 15% public open space, to the Anderson Ln VMU corridor, with 2% open space. "The City wants to make our older suburbs pedestrian-friendly, but they've left out the secret ingredient."