

Austin No Kill Coalition 2012 City Council Candidate Questionnaire



Answers from Bill Spelman,
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1. In 2011, based on the work of Austin Animal Center, its placement partners, and the City Council's mandated No Kill Implementation Plan passed in March 2010, Austin's open-admission shelter saved 91% of all impounded dogs and cats, giving Austin the status as the largest "No Kill" city in the United States. Do you support (or continue to support) Austin's mandated No Kill Implementation Plan, and do you commit (or remain committed) to maintaining Austin's status as a 90% save-rate "No Kill" community? And, would you support increasing the save-rate target beyond 90%? Why or why not?

I voted to adopt the 2010 Implementation Plan to Reduce Animal Intake and Increase Live Animal Release and I continue to support the plan's goals and strategies. At this time I think it is too early to increase our save rate beyond 90%. While the City's Animal Services Office and its all-important community partners are demonstrating consistent month-to-month success, there is much work to be done to fulfill the objectives identified in our 2010 Implementation Plan. It would be premature to establish a higher goal before we've executed all that the Implementation Plan calls for and have demonstrated that we and the community can jointly deliver at least a 90% save rate day in and day out, regardless of the slew of complications and variables that affect our efforts. Once we've succeeded in that regard (and I have every confidence that we can), I will gladly consider increasing our save rate goal.

2. In 2007, the City Council voted to relocate Austin's animal shelter to a mostly industrial area off of East 7th Street near 183, against the advice of Austin No Kill organizations and the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Austinites. So far, it appears that the No Kill advocates' concerns were right: the new shelter has 60 fewer kennels for large dogs, early data indicate a drop-off in adoptions since the move, and at least two reports of gun shots near the shelter have caused shelter management to warn volunteers to stay in groups and avoid volunteering after dark. Given the harmful effects of the shelter relocation on resources, staff, and animals, what will you do to make sure Austin doesn't lose its "No Kill" status due to the shelter relocation?

It's not yet six months since Animal Services moved from the TLAC site to the Dunkerley campus, and we expected a slight decline in our overall performance due to the relocation. As Austinites grow more accustomed to the shelter's new location and to the range of services offered at TLAC for which we have contracted out with APA, we hope our outcomes will return to levels we experienced prior to relocation. However, we should not just sit back and wait for this to happen. We need to continue to educate city residents about which services are provided and where. We should improve signage at the intersections of 183, Airport Blvd, and Levander Loop to help folks know where our shelter is and guide them into the Dunkerley campus. And we need to follow through on the range of strategies that play a vital role in ensuring that we reach our live outcomes goals.

One of the most important strategies to maintain our live outcomes success is the development and enhancement of strong community partnerships with organizations focused on rescue, spay & neuter, adoption, and animal care. By maintaining and improving our relationships with APA, Austin Humane Society, Emancipet, Austin SPCA, all of our rescue organizations (like Love-A-Bull and Blue Dog Rescue), and others, the City will be in a better position to respond to these kinds of issues. For example, APA is providing a critical service by running successful adoption services out of TLAC; Emancipet is growing its essential spay/neuter operations. These and other community efforts combine to produce our overall outcomes rate, and keeping the animal welfare community focused on working together to achieve the common goal is what will keep us successful.

3. In the same 2007 vote to relocate Austin's animal shelter, the City Council also voted to keep open at least the Davenport Building at the current Town Lake Animal Center as a permanent downtown adoption center. That decision was reconfirmed in the 2010 No Kill Implementation Plan vote by the City Council, and again in subsequent votes. Yet the YMCA released plans this year to build a swimming pool project that would require demolishing Town Lake Animal Center, and the YMCA appears to have committed only to a very small adoption center near the current TLAC site. What is your position on the

YMCA swimming pool proposal? Do you support demolishing Town Lake Animal Center? If so, do you commit to replacing it with an at-least 5,000 square feet adoption center (the approximate size of the Davenport Building) with cages and kennels for cats and dogs?

I recognize the value that a centrally located and well-known adoption center brings to a live outcomes strategy. I also understand that a lot of the former TLAC site sits in floodplain, has deteriorating buildings and infrastructure, and is generally too outdated to serve our 21st century animal welfare needs. While I was not on Council during 2007, I understand that these are the main reasons why the City chose to relocate the Animal Services office to a new location. So at this time, I do not support demolishing TLAC without having a good understanding of where a new central adoption center would be sited, nor do I support permanently maintaining animal welfare presence on this site, other than potentially the Davenport building. There is more work to be done on this matter and I am committed to examining this issue with the range of concerns in mind.

4. Austin Pets Alive has saved more than 12% of the city shelter's intake each of the last two years, which is approximately as many animals as all other partner shelters and rescue groups combined. Specifically, Austin Pets Alive saves the kittens less than 8 weeks old, the puppies with parvo, the small dogs, and the sick and injured dogs and cats who have been placed on the "at risk" list at Austin Animal Center (as well as about half of the large dogs needing additional behavior training who have been placed on the same list). To continue its present rate of lifesaving, Austin Pets Alive will need a building in Austin. Meanwhile, about 75% of the old Town Lake Animal Center site sits empty and unused. Do you support Austin Pets Alive's expanded use of part of the empty cages and kennels at Town Lake Animal Center for the foreseeable future?

APA is to be commended for its exceptional rescue and adoption work. APA – and the work of all our community partners – makes our live outcomes success possible. At this time, however, I cannot support an expansion of services at the TLAC site “for the foreseeable future” for reasons mentioned in question #3 – aging and deteriorating infrastructure, floodplain concerns, and outdated facilities. I will consider a time-limited expansion of adoption services so that we may continue our good work together and to address the current concerns raised by the recent relocation of our Animal Services Office to the Dunkerley campus. This expansion of services should coincide with planning on a new adoptions facility and should be expedited to prevent inertia from inhibiting our progress. If a proposal comes to Council, I will want to ensure that overflow animals at our Dunkerley campus receive priority placement at TLAC.

5. The extremely successful No Kill Implementation Plan passed by City Council in March 2010 was originally drafted in a collaborative effort with city staff and the Austin Animal Advisory Commission. As you know, each Council Member selects one person to serve on the Commission. What qualities will you look for in selecting an appointee for the commission? And will you ensure that your appointee is committed to Austin's 90% save-rate goal? If you are currently on Council, do you stand by the votes and positions of your current appointee?

Boards and commissions are meant to give well rounded, thoroughly considered recommendations to City Council, and all of my nominees are selected on their personal and professional experience with the issues that come before the commission. I check on their ability to objectively consider an issue, to recognize gaps in a board's deliberations process, and to respectfully insist that issues are considered from as many perspectives as possible. If I believe their actions are out of line with these guidelines, I will – and have – replaced commissioners. Nevertheless, I do not insist that my nominees share all of my policy perspectives. I do not instruct them how to vote on issues. I do not always vote the same way they do.

I support the role that Emily Phillips has played on the AAC, recognizing that she supports our community's 90% live outcomes objective, has direct animal rescue experience, and at times provides a different perspective on the conversations at the AAC that I believe are valuable for the development of sound policy recommendations.

Allow me to take this opportunity to implore the animal welfare community to try to close the deep divide that has fractured the community. I don't presume to understand the origins of this fissure, but having worked with folks from "both sides of the fence," I do believe that everyone has a role to play and that we're all working to the same end: Save as many animals as we can; keep them or place them in loving, permanent homes; and provide them with services that will give them healthy, happy lives. Leaders in this community have been vilified for their efforts and tensions run deep and personal. Once we all embrace the idea that animal welfare is embodied by a continuum of care and services, we can begin to understand, respect, and count on the entire community of animal welfare advocates and service providers to get us to our goals.

6. More than 20 different dog breeds are banned in the overwhelming majority of Austin's apartment-housing market, making finding appropriate housing very difficult for owners of these dogs despite high levels of owner responsibility and great dog temperaments and training. In turn, the difficulty in finding housing negatively and significantly impacts adoptions of these breeds from the shelter and forces some owners to surrender their pets, making maintaining No Kill more challenging. Indeed, breed discrimination is even included in the neighborhood rules for the Mueller Development, which began as a public-private partnership between the City and the developer. Would you support an ordinance that would prohibit breed discrimination by apartment complexes, homeowners' associations and other housing authorities in Austin? Would you at least support a rule eliminating breed discrimination in developments paid for in part by public funding or otherwise assisted by the public, such as those receiving zoning changes or other variances?

I completely agree with your statements about breed discrimination and that's part of the reason why I have presented proclamations to Love-A-Bull for the past couple of years honoring the good work they have done in this difficult arena. But despite the fact that (for example) pit bulls are usually friendly to strangers and not especially aggressive, the public's misperception persists. That issue may best be addressed by a very public education campaign prior to enacting an ordinance. I would want to understand how the ordinance would work, what unintended consequences may result from it – especially when discussing publicly funded housing – and what legal challenges could arise before supporting an ordinance of this kind.

7. Pit bull type dogs, like other large dogs, are the highest at-risk population for "euthanasia" at the shelter. Love-A-Bull, mixed breed rescue groups, shelter staff, and the Animal Advisory Commission all recognize that there is a great need to address public misperception and reverse media stereotypes that paint a negative picture of these dogs, in order to increase adoptions and acceptance of pit bulls as wonderful family companions and maintain a commitment to No Kill. Do you support the work of these groups and the message that they are sending to the community, through City support of pit bull-focused education and awareness events and initiatives?

When people see an American pit bull terrier, they should think “Buster Brown,” not “Michael Vick.” As described above, I fully support the work of Love-A-Bull and other groups to change the stereotype of pit breeds and other large dogs.

8. In 2011, Austin became the largest “No Kill” City in the United States due to the City shelter and placement partners' implementation of proven programs and policies that had already successfully ended shelter killing in other communities such as Reno, NV, Charlottesville, VA, and Ithaca, NY, among dozens of others. Nonetheless, some activists in Austin are against these lifesaving programs and policies, and instead favor

a regressive and punitive “mandatory spay-neuter” ordinance that would impose severe monetary penalties (or worse) on the small percentage of Austinites who either cannot afford to, have no access to, or have elected not to alter their pets. Given that such punitive laws have been proven in an extensive study by the ASPCA to have failed---in every community in which they have been implemented---to either reduce shelter intake or increase community spay/neuter rates, and in fact have increased killing, intake, and spending in multiple communities, are you willing to risk Austin’s success by enacting such a punitive law?

No, I am not. I think the ASPCA has done its job well, and agree that our community's spay/neuter program should be well-supported and well-funded. It should be an entirely voluntary program closely targeted on the animal population at highest risk of showing up in our shelters that incorporates incentives to get folks to fix their pets.

That said, I should also mention that in my three years of office I have not met any Austin animal welfare advocate or service provider who is “against the lifesaving programs and policies” included in the 2010 Implementation Plan. I have met with individuals who support mandatory spay/neuter laws, but only when these laws work in concert with the other Implementation Plan strategies. I do not share their enthusiasm for mandatory spay/neuter laws, but have always found them to be sincere in their support for our common goals.