Opinion//Editorials
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We wish we could support Austin's Prop Q. Here's why we can't endorse it.

Austin taxpayers deserve accountability and proof of progress before being asked to shoulder another increase.

Austin's Proposition Q, a property tax increase on the Nov. 4 ballot, promises the type of spending most civic-minded residents would embrace. More than $35 million to address homelessness. Nearly $23 million to maintain fire department staffing, expand EMS and mental health services, and invest in other public safety priorities. Plus millions more for parks maintenance, workforce development and other programs.

All worthy initiatives. All things we wish we could support.

Yet we cannot support Prop Q — a $110 million cash infusion to City Hall after years of rising tax bills, diminishing returns and, at times, careless use of taxpayer dollars, in small but symbolic spending on logos and lunches that undercuts the public's willingness to open their wallets further. For the typical homeowner, a $105 property tax increase is already built into next year's city budget; approving Prop Q would add another $198 on top of that.

That is a significant ask. This tax hike comes amid the long-running drumbeat of affordability concerns, in a city where 58% say the high cost of living is Austin's most pressing concern, nearly half the renters are struggling to afford housing and priced-out residents continue to leave.

Since 2018, the typical homeowner's city tax bill has risen from $1,317 to $1,969, an increase driven in part by voter-approved initiatives such as the Project Connect transit expansion and several city bonds. With the approval of Prop Q, that homeowner's city tax bill would rise to $2,272 — a 73% increase over where it was less than a decade ago.

Those ever-rising bills bring a growing pool of city revenues that somehow never seem to be enough. The city's general fund — which covers core services from police to parks — has grown from $1 billion in 2018 to more than $1.4 billion this year. Between other revenues and the passage of Prop Q, the general fund next year would reach nearly $1.6 billion.

Austin residents have repeatedly shown a willingness to invest in their city when leaders present a clear, credible case for doing so. But that trust is not unconditional. When city leaders return to taxpayers year after year asking for more, without demonstrating sufficient progress or stronger financial discipline, confidence begins to erode.

The question facing Austin voters this fall is not whether the city's goals for expanded services are worthy — they are — but whether City Hall has earned the trust for another round of taxpayer generosity.

Rising tax burden, shrinking trust

City Hall's revenues have never been higher, yet too many residents see too little return on their investment. That frustration has deepened with a string of spending controversies that, while small in dollar terms, epitomize a broader problem.

The city spent $1.1 million on a new logo and rebranding effort, even as residents faced another property tax hike. City Manager T.C. Broadnax expensed $3,300 in working lunches, and Council Member Ryan Alter charged $1,200 in solo meals — both of them reimbursing the city after Statesman reporting brought that questionable spending to light. Former Council Member Leslie Pool's $6,000 upgrade to business class for a flight to Germany for a cultural exchange trip drew similar criticism.

These are minor amounts in the context of Austin's $1.4 billion general fund, but they reflect concerns that officials are not treating taxpayer dollars with care. They highlight the need for a stricter policy limiting food and travel expenses to the true necessities of public service, not treating them as perks of the job. Instead, while putting Prop Q on the ballot, council members added even more money in their food, travel and office budgets.

Beyond those optics are deeper fiscal concerns. Apart from Prop Q, the city has lacked a long-term plan to replace the federal COVID relief dollars that temporarily funded major homelessness initiatives, leaving critical services vulnerable as those funds expire. Last year's approval of a five-year, $218 million police contract sought to address legitimate staffing shortages but locked in escalating costs that will further strain future budgets. Together, these choices show a city government better at expanding its obligations than managing them.

City officials point to the strain of meeting rising costs while state law caps the growth in property tax revenue from existing properties at just 3.5% a year. They pine for a previous era when those tax revenues regularly grew up to 8% a year — as if that type of increase, year after year, was sustainable for taxpayers.

But Austin households face many of the same financial pressures as City Hall, including rising health care premiums and fuel costs, not to mention the cost of goods soaring by 21% since 2020. Meanwhile, Austin remains a thriving city, collecting on average $19 million a year in new tax revenue from new construction added to the tax rolls, a boon beyond the 3.5% increase in tax revenues from existing properties.

A city as prosperous and resourceful as Austin should be able to live within its means.

A need for accountability

The spending on homelessness, in particular, demands greater transparency and accountability. Austin has spent more than $400 million over the past five years addressing the crisis, yet a city audit last year found that some providers' contracts lacked performance goals or data to measure success. Residents see the suffering on city streets and the encampments scattered around town and rightly ask what progress their tax dollars are making.

A report this month found the number of shelter beds and housing units has more than doubled since 2019, helping more people exit homelessness and shortening the still-lengthy wait for assistance. What's still missing is a rigorous analysis of which programs are working and whether they're cost-effective.

At the same time that council members were advancing Prop Q, they approved plans to develop a public dashboard tracking homeless service providers' funding and outcomes. That is a promising step. But the public deserved that data years ago, not on the eve of another tax hike.

The trust issues radiate beyond City Hall. The Austin school district last year won voter approval — and this board's support — for a sizable tax increase to stave off the worst budget cuts, only to announce a proposal this month to close 13 campuses next school year. Travis County commissioners just approved a one-time disaster tax hike that will raise $42 million, even as they've spent only half that amount so far responding to the July floods. And Project Connect — once pitched as a transformational transit network, also with this board's support — has shrunk to a fraction of its original scope amid ballooning costs and uncertain federal funding.

Count us among the taxpayers who are losing faith that additional investments will deliver on officials' promises.

If Prop Q passes, City Hall owes taxpayers a clear, public accounting for every dollar — including detailed reporting of outcomes, not just intentions. If it fails, city leaders should take the result as a wake-up call to confront inefficiency, rebuild trust and adopt stronger fiscal guardrails. In our view, such a wake-up call is overdue. Rejecting Prop Q would force the City Council to make difficult budget decisions to close Austin's $33 million shortfall, sparking a clarifying process of separating wants from needs, just as families must do with their own limited budgets.

The aspirations behind Prop Q — stronger public safety, expanded homelessness services, better parks — reflect values Austin shares. But values alone can't justify an ever-rising tax burden, especially in a city where affordability remains residents' top concern and trust is in short supply.

The Austin American-Statesman Editorial Board recommends voting "Against" Proposition Q.