

Proposition Q isn't just about taxes; it's also about trust



A resident addresses the Austin City Council. Voters on Nov. 4 will consider higher property taxes under Proposition Q.

BY EMILY GIRARD
GUEST COLUMNIST

This November, Austinites will decide whether to approve Proposition Q, a measure that would raise the city's property tax rate by 5 cents per \$100 in property value. For the typical homeowner, that means an estimated \$198 more each year, on top of the \$105 increase already baked into Austin's tax

rate, plus an expected \$115 increase in fees and utility rates. That's not a small ask, especially when many families are already burdened by inflation, high interest rates and rising costs for basic essentials.

At Unlock MLS and the Austin Board of REALTORS, our work is rooted in housing. We don't see affordability as an abstract policy debate. It's the difference between whether families can buy a home, stay in one or get pushed farther from the communities they love. Every dollar and every city decision matters.

This vote isn't simply about dollars and cents. It's a test of whether taxpayers believe the city of Austin is using their money responsibly and whether city leaders are being transparent about the challenges ahead.

Those challenges have been building for years. City budgets have leaned on temporary fixes — from COVID relief funds to stopgap revenue strategies — approaches that kept things afloat but didn't keep pace with core needs such as public safety, EMS, homelessness response and park maintenance. Today's City Council is facing a difficult reality they didn't create, but also one they can't ignore. And now, they must develop a long-term plan to correct it, because no single ballot measure can.

That's why the question isn't just whether this year's tax rate election fails or passes. It's what happens next. Without deeper changes, we could face another rate hike next year — and the year after that. Austinites don't deserve that. Nor should that be the expectation.

The harder question City Hall must answer is about performance. Are city programs achieving results? Are tax dollars being directed to the priorities that matter most? Are we tracking outcomes and adjusting when goals aren't met?

That accountability gap is where public trust breaks down. People will support investments when they see results. What they won't accept is being asked for more money, year after year, without clear evidence of impact.

Consider homelessness. Austinites have repeatedly shown their willingness to support funding for housing, outreach and cleanup efforts, but new offices and strategies won't build credibility on their own. Clear, public benchmarks are needed. How many people were housed? How fast are encampments cleared? Are outcomes improving over time?

This conversation isn't about opposing city services or denying how difficult it is to run a fast-growing community. It's about expecting the same level of discipline from City Hall that families show around their kitchen tables. Households make tough decisions every day about what to cut, keep and prioritize. The city should be expected to do the same.

So what should you as a voter do? First, learn the details about the tax rate election and make an informed decision. Don't rely on headlines. Dig in, ask questions to your elected officials and understand what's at stake for you and your family.

Next, regardless of how you vote, advocate for accountability and transparency in our city's budget process. That includes public-facing metrics to measure success and adjust funding when outcomes fall short. Austinites deserve to know not just how their tax dollars are spent, but whether they're working.

This year's election isn't just a vote on a tax rate. It's an opportunity for Austinites to send a clear message: We expect a budget process that measures outcomes, publishes results and adapts when needed. Whether Proposition Q passes or fails, that expectation should be unanimous.

At its core, this election is about reaffirming our priorities as a community and how we expect City Hall to deliver on them. With strong accountability and a long-term plan, the city can turn ambitious goals into results Austinites can see and believe in.

Emily Girard is the CEO of the Austin Board of REALTORS and Unlock MLS.