

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

Responses Requested by September 14, 2018

Background on CEER and HOME:

The Coalition for Environment, Equity and Resilience (CEER) is a collaboration raising awareness of the connection between pollution, place, and the public's health. CEER brings together advocacy, social justice and education groups from three main constituencies: environmental justice, affordable housing, and conservation. Together, these main constituencies developed an 8-point plan to guide recovery efforts and infrastructure spending after Hurricane Harvey.

HOME is a diverse coalition of community-based organizations in Texas. Our shared mission is to make Houston stronger, more resilient, and more equitable in the long road to recovery from Hurricane Harvey. HOME believes that storms like Harvey hit hardest for people of color, immigrants, low-income families, and low-wage workers. These communities have an important and powerful voice in how the government makes choices about its future. HOME's focus is on long-term recovery and making sure that federal, state, and philanthropic funds serve communities in the Greater Houston area most affected by natural disasters.

All answers should be limited to 50 words or less. We appreciate you participating and informing community members about your positions on these topics.

Environmental Equity and Resiliency:

Environmental Equity addresses the built and natural environment. It is not limited to parkland, or the preservation of natural resources like bayous or prairies, but whether a community has access to the same safe drinking water, the same walkability to schools, the same clean air, and the same open or natural park spaces as other communities. As a city, Houston has a long history of intentional discrimination in siting of industrial sources, and while the County has less land control, it too has numerous superfund sites, issues of groundwater contamination and a role to play in environmental enforcement.

1. What is your top environmental concern for the County and what role does the office you are seeking play in addressing that concern? (Air pollution, water pollution, trash, flooding, etc.)

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

Flooding because it threatens the very livelihood of our region. The county must strengthen and enforce drainage regulations and work with the community to invest recovery funds in the best way possible. We need a vision for our county's environmental future, prepare and prevent, rather than always cleaning up.

2. What tools would you utilize as a County official to ensure environmental clean-up of degraded land sites as well as reverse the documented pattern of siting landfills, recycling centers, and industrial facilities in low-income and minority neighborhoods?

Economic development packages so areas are attractive to entities other than industrial polluters. Produce a map of chemical facilities in the county so residents are informed. Advocate at the state for access to information and more regulatory muscle. Bring contested cases to advocate for changes in facilities that threaten communities.

3. What measures within the County's authority and its influence on regional planning agencies could be pursued to reduce air, land and water pollution?

Broadly, we must leverage the potential efficiencies from being an umbrella to various jurisdictions. Produce a Climate Action Plan to guide resilience policy. Adopt higher green building standards in the county. Invest in public transportation instead of more roads. Prioritize the coastal barrier to protect our industry from storm surge.

4. Do you think it appropriate to increase the County's budget line item for environmental enforcement?

Yes. After Harvey, we relied on Texas for air quality monitors, and they took them down to protect the polluters. Pollution Control needs more resources to investigate and the County Attorney to litigate. We must do air quality monitoring locally and push for better policies around environmental enforcement lawsuits.

5. How should the County respond to the environmental threat of molds and toxins in people's homes in the aftermath of Harvey?

Vulnerable populations must be intentionally protected as part of a flood control strategy. We must prioritize the most at-risk communities in buyout programs. The county must provide residents with information about potential toxin sources in their area and provide release warnings in an accessible format.

6. Within CEER's 8-point plan, which priority is most meaningful to you and why?

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

~~Transparency. I know that the first obstacle to effective government is a lack of transparency, and have worked throughout my life to push for open government. The only way to ensure government is leading profound, community-centered change, is for change to happen in front of the eyes of the community.~~

Flooding and Infrastructure:

We know that Hurricane Harvey flooded hundreds of thousands of homes and apartments. We also know that federal funding for flood mitigation is often required to be spent in the areas that have the highest property values. The two watersheds which, according to the SSPEED center, had the most residential flooding were Greens watershed and Brays watershed and there are no United States Army Corps of Engineers projects slated for those watersheds. Continuing development will likely create additional flooding problems in those watersheds as well.

1. How do you propose to protect and expand the riparian corridors and the existing natural flood control ability of the land?

~~We must adopt adequate and transparent development, building, and planning standards. Incorporate climate change and update floodplain designations. Enforce the County's subdivision plat authority and drainage authority. Create incentives to retrofit properties to protect from flooding and to build in less dangerous areas.~~

2. What are some of the tools you believe could address flooding in the Greens and Brays watershed beyond those projects identified in the recent bond election?

~~We must work with our attorneys so we can maximize the use of funds for low-income areas that may not otherwise meet federal cost-benefit requirements. Stop approving upstream development that does not have adequate flood mitigation. Ensure projects take into account rainfall projections based on climate change.~~

3. Would you prioritize the spending of the Harris County Flood Control District bond money to address past inequities in flooding protection across watersheds?

~~Yes. The enforcement of equity language in the bond is up to the Commissioners Court. Many projects will be done first simply because those neighborhoods have been prioritized over others in the past, so they are further along. As with my past work, I will fight for the most vulnerable.~~

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

Affordable Housing:

There are many options to expand affordable housing: developer incentives that require that a proportion of units are affordable, better leveraging of federal housing funds to get more units per dollar in partnership with others, use of state and local bond and development incentives (e.g., MUDs, 381 agreements), Limited Equity Corporations, or land banking to name a few. For County officials, land development controls are limited and yet, the County will receive over \$1 billion to address the issue of affordable housing impacted by Harvey.

1. In your own words, describe the role the County plays in affordable housing and how you would engage in that role?

~~The County must anticipate development and plan accordingly rather than responding to housing crises. I will develop a coherent and comprehensive County Housing Plan that includes cooperation with the city and developers, and issues like transportation and food swamps. I will proactively administer the almost \$1b for housing post Harvey.~~

2. Will you support Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) applications and other affordable housing in your precinct?

~~Yes. Additionally, while that's the most common mechanism in place, we need to be thinking beyond that. First so that more applications qualify, are produced, and come before the court, but also to encourage affordable housing more generally.~~

3. Are there approaches to affordable housing siting and development that you will champion or work against?

~~I will champion transit-oriented development that allows people to live near work. Work so people know the risk of flooding in every part of the county. Ensure we offer communities a diversity of options and that they are not put in a worse situation if they agree to relocate.~~

4. Should the County have an emergency management plan in place, and available beds identified for longer term rental, for future storms?

~~Yes. We must work with experts and the community to implement a transparent and effective plan for evacuation and shelter in the event a hurricane - or any other disaster - displaces part of our community. We must ensure people know if they are in a flood plain.~~

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

5. How will your office (if you are elected) ensure that the lowest income people are assisted with the Hurricane Harvey funding process?

~~I will push for Commissioners Court to adopt a binding process that will force community input and equity into the bond decisions. I will work so funds are used to tackle systemic issues, like food deserts.~~

Transparency:

1. If you are elected, please describe three discrete actions you will take to ensure transparency in the County's budget process and its priorities in spending?

~~Lead community outreach and town halls year-long so people know what county government does and can hold it accountable. Make County Commissioners Court meetings welcoming and accessible. Run a public audit and publish transparent, smart metrics on county programs. Streamline agencies and better partner with community groups, academics and nonprofits.~~

Job Creation and Workforce Development:

The destruction of Hurricane Harvey rapidly increased the need for skilled labor to address the renovation and construction needs for rebuilding our communities. Harvey created a unique opportunity to provide members of our community with the training necessary to participate on various building and infrastructure projects.

1. Please describe in your own words key elements that are needed to construct a county wide workforce development program and key partnerships you would like to create in order to create a disaster recovery workforce development program if applicable.

~~Adequate pay and standards, like Better Builder standards, for County projects. Partnerships with community colleges, public schools, and labor unions to increase training and certification-track apprenticeships for trades. Support for people coming back from TDCJ, as we send the most of any other county. Reintegration programs for our jail.~~

2. Do you see local hire as a priority for workforce development? Why or why not?

Yes, we must nurture local talent and put that talent to work to the extent that local workforce is able to provide for our communities' needs. That is how we build for the future of the community.

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

Responsible Contracting and Preventing Wage Theft:

Even before Hurricane Harvey, wage theft was an issue in the Houston/Harris County construction industry. One report states that 38% of Houston construction workers were misclassified as independent contractors. After Harvey, wage theft was documented by researchers. “In just the first four weeks of the disaster recovery, more than one-quarter (26%) of day laborers had been victims of wage theft and the total amount of unpaid wages across the workforce in that short period of time exceeded \$20,000.” Similarly, worker misclassification often artificially lowers wages and denies workers basic protections and benefits due them under the law.

1. What measures, if any, would you propose to protect workers from being victims of wage theft? What consequences would you propose for contractors and subcontractors engaging in wage theft practices?

The county must lead by example. I will push for awarding contracts only to responsible bidders and implement independent monitors and redress mechanisms for workers in county projects.

2. What role can the County plan in ensuring workers are classified properly? Would you support legislation to further penalize these contractors?

~~As the largest county in Texas, I believe our leadership here will set a strong tone. I also will support directing our county's lobbying team to lobby for smart legislation that enforces regulations on worker misclassification.~~

Worker Protections:

The HOME Coalition fully supports the Better Builder Program created by one of our member organizations. The Better Builder Program creates good jobs in the construction industry by establishing minimum standards on construction sites. These standards include a living wage for all construction workers, OSHA 10-hour safety training for all workers, workers compensation coverage, local hiring goals

Candidate Questionnaire from CEER and HOME

to place workers in approved skills training programs, and independent on-site monitoring to ensure these standards are met.

1. Would you support incorporating these standards as minimum requirements on Hurricane Harvey disaster related sites in the County? Please explain why or why not.

Yes, I support these standards for all county projects, not just those that are Harvey disaster related.

2. Many government entities have passed fair contracting (often referred to as responsible bidder ordinances) or best value contracting legislation to level the playing field between construction entities. Explain whether you support legislation like fair contracting or best value and why?

Travis County has already done this. We must lead rather than catch up. I will push that we adopt the Better Builder program or equivalent. Implementing a third party certification program like Better Builder will set standards beyond minimum legal requirements, which often go unenforced.