

# An interview with Doug Greco

I talk with the underdog mayoral candidate.



**Jack Craver**

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Photo Credit: *Aryel Muse Photography*

It's a strange thing, the 2024 Austin mayoral election.

In many ways, Kirk Watson is in a very different position than when he first ran for reelection in 2000, during his first stint at City Hall. After a three-year term that drew acclaim from across the political spectrum and earned him the workplace nickname, "Mayor Wonderful," Watson faced only token opponents for reelection, most notably

Leslie Cochran, the cross-dressing homeless man who became an icon of Keep Austin Weird.

In contrast to the May election in 2000 that drew only 38,000 voters, Watson is running on a presidential ballot that will likely draw north of 400,000 in Austin. And as was the case two years ago, when the former mayor and state senator finished in an embarrassing second place in the general election, many of those casting ballots couldn't pick Watson out of a line-up. And unlike in 2000, Watson is no longer a universally beloved figure. In fact, the most common reaction to his tenure from those in politics is a shrug.

And yet, the one key similarity between 2024 and 2000 is that once again, Watson has the entire political establishment on his side, including all but two of his Council colleagues. This is largely because, like then, nobody seems to believe there is a viable opponent.

There are a few people who disagree.

One of them is Doug Greco, the former lead organizer for Central Texas Interfaith, a coalition of religious groups and unions that advocates for the powerless and afflicted. He is one of three declared candidates challenging Watson, along with Katie Tovo and Carmen Llanes Pulido.

Greco, 53, grew up in a small town in central Pennsylvania but moved to Austin in 1997, where he originally worked as a teacher at what was then Johnston High School on the east side.

I sat down with Greco recently in the lobby of the Central Library to talk about his candidacy. The following is an abridged version of our conversation.

**Tell me about your work at Interfaith and how it could translate into your work as mayor?**

It's institutionally-based organizing — trying to build power in working class and middle class neighborhoods across the city. My job was never to be the front face, it

was always to help to identify and develop volunteer leaders who do the work of block-walking, small group meetings and then meeting with legislators.

During the pandemic we were the organization that was the driving force behind getting \$50 million from the city and county for rental assistance and then the \$200 million from the city and county for homelessness.

At first the [city] wanted to put the [American Rescue Act funding] in reserve. We said, 'No, you can do good with this money now, spend it now, build housing. And then we did the same thing with the county. They put \$110 million in, the city put \$93 million in, so it was over \$200 million.

That program has been pretty successful. It went to Community First! Village, Foundation Communities, folks that are building permanent housing. I think there were only 175 (permanent supportive housing) units built in the previous five years, but because of this in the next two years an additional 1,200 units will come.

I think it's just an example of how you build a majority at City Council, understand the interests of Council members, which presupposes you understand their communities. And we had to have congregations or members in each of those City Council districts to be able to meet and get at the interests of the east side, the southwest — I think that skill set is as much or more transferable to the job of mayor than maybe representing a single Council district. You really got to understand the interests of different neighborhoods and how to speak to those interests.

### **Is the current mayor not doing that?**

I think our current mayor, it's like he has Stockholm Syndrome. He's been in the Senate under Dan Patrick for how many years? It's almost an inability to stand up and fight.

I would work with state leaders but I wouldn't work for them. I think that's the challenge right now.

**OK, but what effect do you think a bunch of progressive elected officials can have on what the Republican state leadership does?**

I agree there are limits. You've got to be very strategic. But when there are attacks on civil rights, voting rights, immigrant rights, LGBT rights, or attacks on our local decisions, I don't think we can sit on our heels. The mayor needs to be willing to do that. Do you have to do it all the time? No. Do you have to be strategic? Yes. But you've got to be willing to do that.

**So what would be your top priority as mayor?**

I think addressing affordability. I mean we're the fastest growing city for millionaires but our income inequality continues to increase, our share of Black and Hispanic population continues to decrease.

I would look at it from two sides. One is good jobs and what people earn. Investing in effective workforce development programs that take working adults out of poverty and train them for good jobs, and there are programs that do that.

I think the city should have a Department of Education, so that we have a real focused strategy to work with our public schools. How do we make sure that kids that grow up here have the education to compete for good jobs?

I support continuing to increase the city living wage. When we did that a few years ago it sent a signal to the school district and ACC and the other public entities [to do the same] — we can't set a private industry living wage standard but if the public entities do, [it puts pressure on private sector employers to raise wages] .

In terms of the cost side, housing is the biggest driver. I don't know if we can do \$50 million a year but rental assistance has to be increased. Continuing our commitment to affordable housing, looking what we can do in the next bond for that, and more investments in permanent supportive housing.

And I do support updating the land use code. I do think we need to create more housing at all levels of income. I think we get our biggest bang for our buck on transit corridors, and then also, [I support changes] in single-family neighborhoods, I agree with you that that's going to be a slower build but I think that's important.

I know there's a debate about if it's going to change the neighborhoods and yeah, it's going to change some. I don't think it's happening as fast as the fears that some folks have. But I know from my experience, I'm tired of living on the edge of neighborhoods. There ought to be more people who can enjoy the neighborhoods.

For me the check on neighborhoods losing their character is looking at the role of institutional investors. It's close to 40% of single-family homes bought by institutional investors.

I'd support programs for low-income and middle-income folks that want to build ADUs or take advantage of some of the [recent LDC] changes. Maybe a city revolving loan fund. Also, any programs or subsidies that we can do to help folks buy homes, especially folks that are lower-income, that will help folks compete in the marketplace against institutional investors.

**Any money we use to help middle-class folks buy homes is money that can't be used for rental assistance or something more dire.**

Yeah, folks who are lower-income or working class, we start there. A quarter of our residents are at 200% of the poverty level. I always think it makes sense, given tradeoffs, that's where we'll get the biggest bang for our buck.

But the more we keep folks in Austin, working in Austin, it's going to benefit us.

**In the past you've said that you don't want to support land use changes that benefit private equity. What exactly does that mean? Do you believe that investors are more likely to benefit from reduced zoning regulations than regular people?**

Anytime people have more flexibility with their property, there's a chance folks are going to get bought out by big investors. But it was a problem before. It's not like this is going to create the problem.

I think HOME I passed, HOME II is going to pass, the challenge for the next mayor and Council is to ensure that it works for people who live here and want to live here.

It's a preexisting problem, but we also have to make sure that we don't create unintended consequences.

### **Let's talk about the city budget. What's on your mind?**

Investing in people. We're investing tons of money in highways and public transit and I support Project Connect — it's over budget and delayed but I still believe in it. But why can't we have a billion dollar human development fund — invest in workforce, education, job training, affordable housing, rental assistance, and be just as bold as our investments in infrastructure.

I think the city needs to take care of basic services. We need to have a safe city. I think safety sometimes gets defined too narrowly as law and order, that's how the current mayor has spoken about it. We need to make we have a fully staffed police force, fire and EMS and we need to pay our public safety workers well. I think community policing is important, I think we need to continue racial equity training for the police cadet classes. We need to implement the police oversight measures that were passed [by voters] resoundingly.

But I think public safety also includes what's happening at the legislature, trying to attack our basic rights. We don't have an LGBT Center — the city is looking at including that in the next bond. The city should have an LGBTQ Center. Now that the UT students don't have one, we don't have somewhere to point people.

### **What about homelessness and addiction and mental health?**

I think doubling down on the programs we already have. That \$200 million probably needs to be \$400 million. I would use bond money for that.

**The city is kind of strapped for cash due to state property tax restrictions. So all these things you want to invest in — what's your strategy for revenue?**

Obviously we've got to meet our budget. I have to look at the budget closely in terms of proposals to increase the tax rate or not.

When we have more development overall as a city, especially if it's environmentally friendly and dense, that can be a revenue generator.

**Do you see any areas where the city could cut?**

I think all these private consulting contracts, some of them got cut. I think within our city staff and in our community, there's real smart policy folks that can evaluate our homelessness programs.

**What are your thoughts on Kirk Watson's tenure?**

I'll tell you what I would not have done.

I would not have stood with the governor and brought DPS troopers into our neighborhoods. I would not have given a special favor to his deputy chief of staff for his charter school. I would not have hired my PAC director to run the city.

In addition to that, I think he's losing the perspective of the impact of state policy on the city. I think that's 100% to do with the fact that he was in the state senate for 15 years and has come to identify with the thinking of his captors.

He has just been so immersed in big money and that's who he answers to. He totally flipped on housing policy and sometimes people do the right things for the wrong reasons, so I'm not going to begrudge that but looking for a 4th term as mayor, I think it's time to turn the page.



## What about Kathie Tovo and Carmen Llanes Pulido?

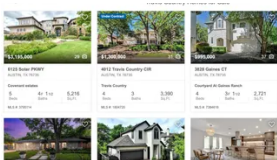
I'm not running against them. I'm running against the mayor.

## When you think of Austin in 2050, what do you hope has changed and what do you hope has stayed the same?

My big fear is that, in terms of affordability, we become like a San Francisco, where you get rich or you leave. The Central Texas I would want, would be a region, a five-county region, in which we have diversity — racial diversity, economic diversity, in terms of family types — in every part of that region, including Austin. And if you're a teacher and you want to buy a house in Austin, you can do that.


*I am extending an invitation to all other mayoral candidates to sit down for an interview. I hope they all accept!*

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