

THE COUNTY BUDGET AS A MORAL DOCUMENT

Travis County’s \$2.3B plan shows who we are — and who we’re trying to become

By Villager staff

(AUSTIN, TX) - Travis County’s newly approved \$2.3 billion budget is more than a spreadsheet of allocations. It is, in every meaningful sense, a moral document. Budgets reveal priorities, expose blind spots, and clarify what a community refuses to ignore. This year, county leaders sent a clear message: the old approach to mental health, public safety, and basic access to services is no longer enough.

The most consequential shift is the county’s investment in crisis care and behavioral-health infrastructure. For decades, families across East Austin and the eastern crescent have lived with the fallout of a fractured system — loved ones cycling through emergency rooms, neighbors arrested for behaviors rooted in untreated illness, and people experiencing homelessness pushed from one jurisdiction to another without long-term care.

By funding new psychiatric beds, expanding crisis services, and laying groundwork for a future Mental Health Crisis Center, the county is finally moving from triage to transformation. It is an overdue acknowledgment that the cost of inaction

is measured not only in dollars, but in human suffering.

Of course, the budget carries a tax increase — about \$36 more per year for the median homeowner. For some, that’s manageable. For others, especially longtime residents in historically Black and working-class neighborhoods, every uptick adds pressure in a city where affordability erodes month by month. Critics argue that Austin-centered programs dominate the spending and that smaller communities in western Travis County may not see proportional benefit. That tension is real. But it also reflects a deeper truth: the county’s greatest needs are concentrated where decades of underinvestment intersect with rapid displacement.

This budget reframes public safety not as enforcement, but as stability — the stability that comes from treatment, crisis intervention, and reducing the number of people forced into jails or emergency rooms because no other door was open. The county’s alignment with Austin’s “No Wrong Door” initiative signals a growing consensus: safer streets require safer systems.

For East Austin, the stakes are personal. Our

neighborhoods have carried the weight of overlapping crises — housing insecurity, behavioral-health gaps, and the erosion of community institutions. Investments in crisis care, disaster response, and transportation studies matter here because they shape whether families can stay rooted, whether elders can access care without crossing the city, and whether young people inherit a community that supports them rather than penalizes them.

A budget cannot reverse displacement. But it can slow the forces that accelerate it. It can stabilize families who are one crisis away from losing everything. It can build the infrastructure that keeps communities whole.

This \$2.3B plan is a beginning, not a victory lap. Its success will depend on transparency, equitable implementation, and sustained pressure from the communities it claims to serve. Western Travis County deserves meaningful outreach. Eastern Travis County deserves measurable outcomes. And all residents deserve a system that treats mental health as a public good, not a private burden.

Travis County has taken a step toward a more humane future. Now the work — our work — is to ensure that step becomes a stride.

Planned Mass-Shooting Threat at the Texas State Capitol Foiled

Swift action by DPS and the FBI prevents a potential tragedy in Austin

By Villager staff

(AUSTIN, TX) - State and federal authorities say they stopped a credible plan to carry out a mass shooting at the Texas State Capitol, arresting a 40-year-old suspect in the early hours of Wednesday morning. According to the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS), officers received a tip Tuesday night about an individual threatening a violent attack on the Capitol scheduled for **Oct. 1**. Within hours, DPS SWAT moved on the suspect’s residence in **Converse, Texas**, just northeast of San Antonio, and arrested **Benny Caldera Jr.** at approximately 3 a.m.

Caldera was booked into the **Bexar County Jail** and charged with **felony terroristic threat against a public servant**, a charge that reflects the seriousness of the alleged plot. Investigators say Caldera had been **collecting guns and ammunition** and had made explicit statements about “shooting up” the Capitol. According to arrest documents, he told a friend, “I love you, if you don’t see me again... I am going to the Capitol and I am going to shoot it up.”

People close to Caldera had recently reported growing anger, erratic behavior, and signs of potential violence. Authorities say he had voiced rage over political issues and the direction of the country, and investigators are now examining his devices to determine whether he had accomplices

or was acting alone. Both DPS and the FBI emphasize that the threat was **credible**, prompting an immediate multi-agency response.

The alleged attack date — Thursday, Oct. 1 — raised alarm among state officials, who were notified of the threat and arrest early Wednesday. While the Capitol remains open, DPS has increased its security presence and says that heightened patrols will continue as the investigation unfolds. Governor Greg Abbott publicly praised the rapid response, stating that Texas “will NOT tolerate threats of violence against our Capitol.”

Caldera was initially held on a \$75,000 bond and later transferred to federal custody for additional charges. Court records show he had a prior weapons charge in 2023, though authorities have not yet indicated whether that history played a role in the alleged plot.

For Austin residents, the foiled attack is a sobering reminder of the volatility surrounding political institutions and the importance of rapid, coordinated law-enforcement response. DPS officials stress that while the immediate threat has been neutralized, the investigation remains active — and the Capitol will operate under enhanced security until authorities determine there is no ongoing risk.

Historic East Austin Neighborhoods host forum for City Council, AISD candidate

African American Cultural Heritage District Neighborhoods to hear from candidates

Barbara Spears-Corbett

The neighborhoods of the African American Cultural Heritage District—including Robertson Hill, Swede Hill, Homewood Heights, Rogers Washington Holy Cross Historic District, Chestnut, Blackland and other neighborhoods--will hold a candidate forum for AISD Trustee District 1 and At-Large candidates and District 1 City Council candidates **on Saturday, October 3, 2026. The forum will begin at 1 p.m. and will be held at the Yellow Jacket Conference Center, 900 Thompson Street (Eastside ECHS at L. C. Anderson Campus).**

The forum will begin with the AISD Board candidates, followed by the District 1 Austin City Council candidates. Candidates will each have 15 minutes to introduce themselves and their platform and then take questions from the audience with the remaining time.

THE LAST DAY TO REGISTER TO VOTE IS OCTOBER 5TH!

Circle C Rezoning Clears Council Hurdle, Igniting Southwest Austin Debate

A 1,000-unit plan tests the balance between growth, neighborhood safety, and environmental stewardship

By Villager staff

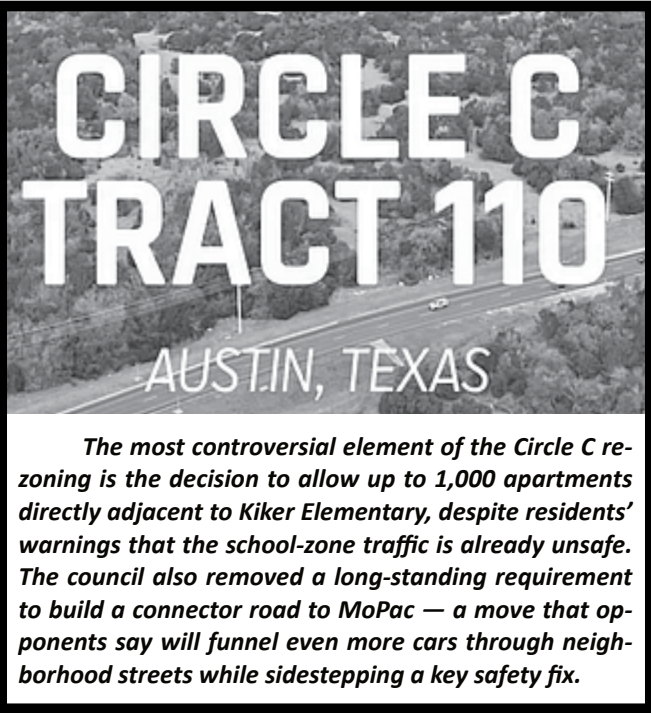
(AUSTIN, TX) - The Austin City Council has approved one of the most consequential land-use changes in Southwest Austin in more than a decade, voting to rezone a 67-acre tract in Circle C Ranch to allow **up to 1,000 multifamily units**. The decision — unanimous among participating members, with Council Member Marc Duchen abstaining — reshapes what had long been envisioned as an office-focused site and places new housing pressure on a part of the city already strained by traffic, school capacity, and environmental limits.

The land, known as **Tract 110**, sits near South MoPac and Kiker Elementary School. Under a 2002 development agreement, the property was restricted to office and limited commercial uses. The new zoning opens the door for dense residential construction, including **100 income-restricted units**, though the future developer remains uncertain as Stratus Properties, the longtime landholder, has announced plans to dissolve.

A Neighborhood at the Breaking Point

Circle C residents turned out in force, filling City Hall with testimony about daily gridlock, dangerous school-zone backups, and fears that funneling apartment traffic through Kiker Elementary’s frontage would heighten risks for children walking or biking to class. Parents described morning drop-off as “already a near-miss waiting to happen,” urging the council to delay approval until a full traffic analysis could be completed.

A flashpoint in the debate was the removal of a requirement that the developer build an extension of South Bay Lane to connect Circle C directly to MoPac. Some residents argued the connection



would disperse traffic more safely; the Circle C Homeowners Association opposed the extension, citing neighborhood impacts. The council ultimately sided with staff recommendations to drop the requirement.

Environmental Stakes on the Edwards Aquifer

The tract lies within the **Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone**, a sensitive environmental area that has historically limited development intensity. Conservation groups warned that dense construction could threaten water quality and undermine decades of aquifer protections. Only about 16 of the 67 acres are actually buildable, with the remainder constrained by easements and environmental buffers — a fact that both complicates the project and heightens scrutiny.

Housing Pressure Meets Neighborhood Resistance

Supporters of the rezoning framed the vote as a necessary response to Austin’s housing shortage, noting that Southwest Austin has few remaining parcels capable of delivering meaningful supply. Council Member Paige Ellis, who represents the district, acknowledged the community’s concerns but said the city must “take opportunities where they exist” to add housing in high-demand areas.

The vote reflects a broader tension playing out across Austin: how to add housing without overwhelming neighborhoods that lack the infrastructure to absorb rapid growth. Circle C, with its winding streets, school-zone chokepoints, and environmentally sensitive terrain, is a case study in that challenge.

Future Outlook

A traffic impact analysis will be required before construction begins, though residents pushed unsuccessfully for that study to precede the vote. With Stratus dissolving, the project’s timeline — and the identity of the eventual developer — remains uncertain.

What is clear is that the council’s decision will reverberate across Southwest Austin. For some, it represents long-overdue progress toward easing the city’s housing crisis. For others, it signals a future of heavier traffic, greater safety risks, and increased pressure on an already fragile aquifer.

As Austin continues to grow, the Circle C rezoning stands as a defining example of the city’s struggle to balance **housing needs, neighborhood stability, and environmental responsibility** — a balance that will only become more difficult as land grows scarcer and demand intensifies.