Affordability has been a stated 2017 focus for Austin City Council, though council members agree the subject is too vast to talk about generally.

District 6 Council Member Jimmy Flannigan, whose district spans Northwest Austin, said one of the biggest challenges for the city in measuring affordability is the amount of economic disparity, not only across the city but also within council districts.

“It’s hard to add it all into a single number to determine whether or not an area is affordable,” Flannigan said.

Housing and transportation in Northwest Austin, he said, are the largest contributors to budget stress. While much of the housing conversation has been focused on providing diversity in housing types across the city, Flannigan said more public transportation options are needed as well.

“We don’t give people enough transportation choice,” Flannigan said. “We end up with families and couples with two cars who can really do it with one if we were able to provide a more robust bus service or more high-capacity transit options.”

District 8 Council Member Ellen Troxclair, whose district covers Southwest Austin, said talking about affordability in general would require a list that would “go on forever.”

“The way to bring prices down overall is to take action on the things we do have direct control over and free up money to allow people to spend it in other ways that their families and budgets necessitate,” Troxclair said.

For Troxclair, that means a fiscal resistance against raising property taxes by the 8 percent legal limit each year. Although property taxes take up the smallest percentage of a family’s budget compared to housing, transportation, child care and health care, she said it is a portion that is increasing and one the city has direct control over.

Earlier in March, Troxclair proposed to council an Affordability Action Plan, which incorporated all of the initiatives currently on council’s plate into a single bucket while also proposing new efforts, such as directing the city manager to present a 2017-18 budget with no effective tax rate increase. The plan was met with heavy criticism from council members, who said the property tax increases were necessary to fund government functions. Action on the item was postponed indefinitely.

“Local government doesn’t have a direct control over child care or health care [costs],” Troxclair said. “But we do have direct control over property taxes, housing and transportation, so let’s focus on those first.”

District 9 Council Member Kathie Tovo, who voted against Troxclair’s plan, said one of her biggest critiques was the absence of a plan to help families with child care. The mayor pro tem and Central Austin representative said housing and transportation often dominate the conversation and consequently keeps child care out of focus.

Food deserts in the city represent one issue that has come into focus for council over the past five years, Tovo said.

“We’re really thinking about food accessibility as an issue, not just in terms of health and basic needs but one of affordability because families have to travel to get the groceries they need to feed themselves, and that drives up their costs,” Tovo said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as an area where people live more than 1 mile away from a grocery store in an urban area and 10 miles away from a grocery store in a rural area.

“A mile doesn’t seem like a very long distance for a healthy and fit individual to get to a grocery store without a vehicle, but when you compound that with low-income individuals and seniors without good sidewalk infrastructure, they can barely walk an eighth of a mile to get to a grocery store, much less a mile,” said Edwin Marty, food policy manager with the city’s office of sustainability.

The result is a large swath of residents relegated to purchasing food from area corner stores—businesses not typically known to carry a wide selection of nutritious food.

Marty said this is acutely felt in Central Austin, where services for the low-income and the homeless population are disappearing as the area becomes more affluent.

“Affordable food access is a primary issue for many, many families in Austin,” Marty said. “The cost of living is much higher in Central Austin. ... Therefore, the affordability piece is particularly vexing.”

As for further change, the council members agreed the mobility bond and CodeNEXT, two of the city’s biggest projects in recent memory, could help ease affordability concerns. Bond projects including new sidewalks and bike paths are expected to begin this year, and the maps for CodeNEXT, the rewrite of the land development code, are due in April.
### Housing Costs

The annual cost of housing across three categories: renting an apartment, renting a home and owning a home, averaged among Central Austin’s 11 zip codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Family with two children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent Apartment</td>
<td>$12,072</td>
<td>$15,936</td>
<td>$21,864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent Home</td>
<td>$25,416</td>
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<td>$25,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Home</td>
<td>$36,107</td>
<td>$36,107</td>
<td>$36,107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### City Fees

- **GROceries**: The annual cost assumes a moderate budget, averaging between male and female, ages 19-50 year-old adults and children between 2-8 years old.
  - Single: $3,304
  - Couple: $7,268
  - Family with two children: $11,903

- **Health Care**: The estimated annual cost of health insurance premiums—does not include average annual out-of-pocket costs.
  - Single: $3,269
  - Couple: $6,538
  - Family with two children: $10,769

- **Transportation**: According to city estimates, assumes each driver owns a 4-year old Toyota Camry.
  - Single: $5,778
  - Couple: $11,556
  - Family with two children: $11,556

- **Child Care**: ‘According to the 2016 Texas Child Care Market Survey, assumes 1 infant and 1 school age child.
  - Single: $0
  - Couple: $0
  - Family with two children: $17,060

- **Groceries**: The United States Department of Agriculture’s “Health Food Plan” estimates the cost of supplying a nutritious diet across different budget, age and gender categories.

- **Key**: Single, Couple, Family with two children

- **Design**: Miranda Baker

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### Affordability Game

The basic items one needs to live in Austin come at a cost, but at the end of the game, how much money do residents have left for the things that they want? "The things that they want?"

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