

District 7's Pool faces off with challenger Gauldin for first time

By [Nolan Hicks](#) - American-Statesman Staff

Highlights

Debate over the Grove and its traffic impact, which has dominated campaign, set tone for debate.

Grove questions followed Statesman investigation that found city management deleted engineers' concerns.

District 7 Council Member Leslie Pool and challenger Natalie Gauldin faced off for the first time Friday evening in a race promising a showdown between two of Austin's most potent political forces: development supporters and neighborhood groups.

The nearly hourlong forum, moderated by a panel from the League of Women Voters, asked questions on issues that ran the gamut from the Austin Police Department to city support of neighborhood schools, but time and again the conversation returned to Austin's rapid growth and the ails it entails: rising housing costs and worsening traffic.



On those core issues, Pool, who co-founded a powerful neighborhood group, and Gauldin — a prominent backer of The Grove at Shoal Creek, one of the most controversial developments in Austin — are polar opposites.

A question about the Grove, which would sit just to the south of District 7, was one of the first of the evening, setting the tone for the rest of the forum.

Pool answered with a detailed list of concerns about the potential traffic problems caused by the project. A couple of city engineers also **raised concerns this spring about the developer's traffic analysis**, though those concerns were dropped from the city report issued in March.

+STEPHEN SPILLMAN

Council Member Leslie Pool, left, speaks as opponent Natalie Gauldin watches during a candidate forum Friday evening.

“We’ve never been against it,” Pool told the American-Statesman afterward, adding that she’s continuing to push the Bull Creek Road Coalition’s proposed downsizing of the project to “help reduce the tsunami of traffic.”

Gauldin, on the other hand, defended the Grove and its traffic projections.

“This is a project that works. The numbers add up, and this site can hold the number of cars that come into the area,” she said.

The campaign between Pool and Gauldin has been one of the hottest in the city early in the campaign cycle. The two have raised a combined \$53,000, from May 12 through June 30, **a notable total considering the city's \$350-per-donor cap on contributions**. Pool reported \$32,415 in contributions to Gauldin’s \$20,460, according to the most recent campaign finance reports.

At the forum, the differences between the two on other issues seemed more minute: They both favor body cameras for police as well as continued city support for the Austin school district, and Gauldin complimented Pool on taking the lead in pushing to shut down the city’s portion of the coal-fired Fayette power plant.

Implicitly and explicitly, throughout the forum, the conversation returned to the race’s center of gravity, the fight over the Grove — a 75-acre, mixed-used development that would sit on largely unused land once owned by the Texas Department of Transportation, just south of 45th Street.

The main group opposing the project, the Bull Creek Road Coalition, has endorsed putting a dense residential development on the site, just south of 45th Street. However, it opposes the developer’s plans to build 360,000

square feet of offices and retail, saying it would produce too much traffic. The developer, ARG Bull Creek, says it needs build the space to make the project financially viable. And ARG argues it has a plan to deal with the traffic.

Pool, the coalition's co-founder, has been the group's most vocal supporter on the council. Her opponent, Gauldin, co-chairs the Friends of The Grove campaign, which has been fiercely critical of Pool and the coalition.

"It'll be an interesting race," said Ed English, a longtime City Hall activist and one of the roughly 50 people who attended the forum. English, who ran for the seat in 2014, recently decided to back Pool. "I think you've got two views that are quite different on most issues, and that'll present some interesting choices for the voters," he said.