



TEXAS MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

Empowering Texas cities to serve their citizens

President **Karen Hunt**, Mayor, Coppell
Executive Director **Bennett Sandlin**

December 8, 2020

The Honorable Bryan Hughes
Senate State Affairs Committee
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711-2068

Dear Chairman Hughes,

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the committee's interim charge concerning local governments' ability to advocate at the state legislature.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, local leaders have been on the front lines of the recovery efforts, working diligently to protect the public health of our residents and promote the economic vitality of our communities under challenging circumstances. The leadership shown by state leaders—from the governor and lieutenant governor to state legislators and state agencies—has been indispensable to our efforts. The result has been true partnership of state and local leaders working towards a common goal. And the continuation of this partnership is absolutely vital to our continued success as a state.

Given the gravity of the unprecedented challenges we face, we are asking this committee to promote policies that afford local leaders a voice at the state capitol this session and beyond. The monumental issues the Texas Legislature will address this session—public health, economic development, closing the digital divide, public safety, and critical infrastructure needs—are not uniquely state-level issues. They're also local issues. And we firmly believe that local leaders have a valuable perspective on these vital topics that needs to be heard. Not for our sake, but for the Texans we all collectively represent.

Passing legislation to deny communities' ability to advocate for the issues above would permanently fracture the relationship between state and local governments, depriving the legislature of valuable information from local governments on the most pressing issues of our time. Local elected officials, meanwhile, would lose the ability to meaningfully participate in the statewide discussions that keenly affect local governments and the diverse group of Texans they represent. In fact, it is the hardworking citizens of the State of Texas who lose should this proposal move forward.

The concept of restricting community advocacy represents a limited view of public discourse and policymaking, not to mention a potentially dangerous understanding of the constitutional guarantees afforded to all citizens. Limiting the ability of certain groups—in this case local officials—to engage in the state policy making process raises concerns under both the Equal Protection Clause of the Federal and Texas Constitutions, as well as the bedrock First Amendment

right of citizens to petition the government for redress of grievances. Our democracy doesn't demand that we always agree, but the law favors a robust policy dialogue that doesn't discriminate based upon a particular viewpoint.

Let's build upon the cooperative spirit that has defined our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. Let's acknowledge that whatever disagreements some might have about the role of local government, Texans are best served by having state and local leaders work together to reach common-sense solutions that benefit everyone. To effectively do so, we must move beyond policy proposals that openly seek to prevent participation in the legislative process. This moment demands it.

Let's continue our good work together.

Sincerely,



Karen Hunt, TML President
Mayor, City of Coppell



Sylvester Turner, Mayor
City of Houston



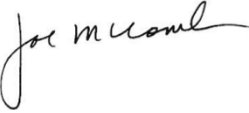
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