City of Austin

A Report to the Austin City Council

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Special Request Report on Public Engagement in Peer Cities

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REPORT SUMMARY

Current City of Austin public engagement practices are conducted through various City departments. The Communications and Public Information Office acts as a City resource, employs guiding principles, and follows an industry-recognized model in an effort to create a culture of civic engagement. However, management notes that measuring outcomes is challenging. The professional literature suggests common public engagement themes include focusing on the long term, building capacity, using multiple communication channels, and ensuring a diversity of viewpoints. Common challenges are performance measurement, engaging underserved citizens, and adequately addressing non-English speaking communities. We identified six cities for comparison, including Dallas and San Antonio in Texas as well as Kansas City, Missouri; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

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PROJECT TYPE

This project was conducted as a non-audit project.

TEAM

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SPECIAL REQUEST REPORT ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN PEER CITIES

Report Highlights

Why We Did This Project

This memo responds to a request from Council Member Pool regarding public engagement practices in peer cities.

What We Did

To complete this special request, we:

- interviewed key staff and researched Austin's current practices regarding public engagement;
- researched and summarized professional literature and practices related to municipal public engagement; and
- contacted staff in selected cities to determine how they conduct public engagement.

Mayor and Council,

I am pleased to present this report on public engagement in peer cities.

BACKGROUND

Public engagement is a process through which members of the public become more informed about, and are able to influence, public decisions. Professional literature indicates that public engagement is important because it helps shape a city in accordance with citizen values.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

Our objective was to research and summarize public engagement practices including Austin's current practices, guidance from professional literature, and peer city practices.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Currently, City of Austin practices related to public engagement are conducted through various City departments. The Communications and Public Information Office is a resource for City departments and employs:
    - guiding principles in an effort to create a culture of civic engagement;
    - an industry-recognized model for public engagement including multiple tools and tactics that seeks to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower citizens; and
    - performance measures to track public engagement activities, but management notes that efforts are needed to better track outcomes.
- Professional literature suggests common public engagement themes include:
    - focus on the long term, build capacity, use multiple communication channels and trained staff, and ensure a diversity of viewpoints; and
    - challenges such as performance measurement, engaging underserved citizens, and adequately addressing non-English speaking communities.
- We identified six cities similar to Austin or recognized for public engagement, including Dallas and San Antonio in Texas as well as Kansas City, Missouri; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance we received from the Communications and Public Information Office as well as peer city staff during this project.

Corrie E. Stokes, Acting City Auditor

Public Engagement Practices in the City of Austin

Public engagement in Austin occurs through various City departments. The Communications and Public Information Office's (CPIO) Community Engagement division is a resource for City departments to create and coordinate community outreach strategies and conduct public engagement. The Community Engagement division has two staff members that are directly responsible for public engagement, including one that is focused on limited access, or hard to reach, populations. Management reported that CPIO would like to be the provider of choice for City departments related to a suite of services, including public engagement. However, City of Austin departments are not required to utilize CPIO resources and some departments have their own public engagement resources that are not coordinated through CPIO. We also noted that Austin does not have a citywide strategic plan related to public engagement. Management indicated that a citizen's public engagement experience with the City may be inconsistent from department to department.

While we did note that a number of City departments conduct public engagement activities, we focused our research on CPIO efforts. The Community Engagement division reported adhering to guiding principles in their effort to create a culture of civic engagement. Those principles are accountability and transparency, fairness and respect, accessibility, predictability and consistency, creativity and community collaboration, and responsible stewardship. In addition, CPIO utilizes a model developed by the International Association for Public Participation called the iap2 public participation spectrum (see Appendix A). Below are various tools and tactics the City employs to address the iap2 spectrum principles:

- **Inform**: The goal of this principle is to inform the public in a neutral manner on policy, problems, and possible solutions. The City has a variety of ways it communicates to the public such as the website, including Austin Finance Online and ePerformance; television; social media; and people, including various department spokespersons. In addition, Austin conducts CityWorks, a program for citizens to learn about the City from City staff. Also, City staff visits community organizations to discuss various topics of interest with stakeholders.

- **Consult**: The goal is to obtain public feedback. The City has many tools for gathering public input, including public meetings, surveys, forums, and specific tools like speak week, meeting in a box, and Conversation Corps. Also, the Community Engagement division facilitates community workshops and virtual town hall meetings. Town halls are televised and streamed online with public participation available by text, phone, and Twitter.

- **Involve**: The goal is to work with the public throughout the entire policy process. The City involves the public via many of the consulting tools listed above, but also through design charrettes; Austin 311; and SpeakUp Austin, an online forum moderated by the Community Engagement division, where citizens can discuss policy and present ideas as well as vote on the ideas posted by other citizens.

- **Collaborate**: The goal is to partner with the public in each aspect of the process of designing policy. The City uses task forces, advisory groups, and working groups, in addition to the traditional boards and commissions, to bring citizens into a policy-building role. The Community Engagement division facilitates some of these groups and provides them with the resources and connections they need to make meaningful recommendations to decision-makers. In addition, Community Engagement partners with local organizations to

provide training in community engagement and opportunities to facilitate public engagement.

- **Empower**: The goal is to place final decision-making in the hands of citizens. This is where public engagement intersects with the classic tools of democracy. One reflection of citizen empowerment is voter turnout.

The Community Engagement division tracks its performance via feedback and survey responses from its users and CPIO reports performance measures, including how many facilitated events were held and what percentage of Austin residents believe Austin values dialogue between citizens and government. Management reported a challenge of performance measurement is that outcomes are not measured as well as activities.

Public Engagement: Summary of Professional Literature

The professional literature[1] notes benefits to creating public engagement opportunities in a city. These benefits include developing public support for a project, proactively identifying citizen concerns, fostering understanding among different groups, and developing citizen priorities for addressing issues. Public engagement is noted as especially useful for addressing public problems and ensuring informed decisions are being made.

Challenges noted in the literature include the difficulty of measuring performance related to public engagement. Surveys and headcounts are used, but that does not always address the quality of the collaborative process. It was also noted that many cities experience problems attracting underserved citizens to public engagement events. Another challenge was translating public engagement materials and programs so that non-English speaking communities can fully participate.

The literature produced by public engagement organizations and professionals highlights many tools and tactics that can be used to build a culture of civic engagement. In addition to the five principles of the iap2 spectrum outlined earlier, some themes emerged from our survey of the literature. For public engagement to be meaningful, citizens must have the power to change the outcome of a project. Also, public engagement is a two-way street – information flows from city government to citizens and citizens need to provide feedback to the city. Further, cities need to provide the public with multiple and varied opportunities to get that information as well as to provide feedback. The information being shared must be responsive to public needs, such as providing data in a searchable format. Finally, the engagement must be ongoing through the public decision-making process – from contemplating, deciding, and creating programs to monitoring their outcomes and providing feedback. Other common theme areas noted in the literature include:

- **Focus on the long term.** The literature suggests it is important to begin a public engagement strategy with a focus on the long term. While each project is different and requires different resources, creating and maintaining partnerships with community groups and local media makes each subsequent project easier because it fosters a culture of trust and collaboration between the city and citizen groups. Additionally, each project increases citizen understanding of the city's capabilities.

- **Build capacity.** As a corollary to focusing on the long term engagement goals, a second suggestion is to build capacity. This means informing and educating the public on city government and its public processes as well as giving them the resources to become

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[1] See Appendix B for a listing of the professional literature reviewed.

community leaders or influencers. The literature suggests that cities can provide community groups with the resources and structure they need to bring their members into a more collaborative relationship and partner with the city. Where community groups are less organized, cities can still reach out to influential and respected members of the community to assist in reaching those communities.

- **Multiple channels.** Another common theme area noted in the literature is that public engagement transpires through multiple channels. While cities should keep abreast of the latest communication technologies, including mobile applications, it is also important to use traditional channels of communication as well as channels accessible to people with limited access to technology. Using multiple channels to engage citizens can result in a more diverse pool for the engagement process.

- **Small groups / large meetings.** The literature strongly encourages the use of small groups in addition to large meetings. Small groups can be more dynamic and facilitate ideation and collaboration. Also, small groups are usually less contentious than public hearings. Large meetings are important for building public acceptance and holding a public debate of policy propositions.

- **Trained facilitators.** The literature also notes that facilitation of public engagement efforts requires high-quality, trained people to guide participation, especially for the "consult" and "involve" principles noted in the iap2 spectrum. Neutral guides can aid in making a public participatory event a success by fostering a climate of collaboration and ensuring each citizen is heard and respected.

- **Diversity of viewpoints.** The literature suggests that cities need to ensure that public engagement provides a diversity of viewpoints. This can be done by recruiting communities that have traditionally been less involved with citizen input. It may also require promoting city projects to those communities. The literature notes that a certain level of trust and cultural understanding, as well as language fluency, is required for effective public engagement. Additionally, cities must be willing to learn from all of their communities what works best for each community related to the engagement and collaboration process.

Public Engagement Practices in Peer Cities

In order to better understand the practices of other municipalities in the area of public engagement, we selected six cities including two in Texas (Dallas and San Antonio), one with a similar governing structure (Kansas City, Missouri), and three with acknowledged practices in the professional literature (Minneapolis, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; and Vancouver, British Columbia).

Among the selected cities, all mentioned the need to embrace digital engagement tools like social media or more specialized applications to augment traditional town-hall style meetings. Two cities, Minneapolis and Portland, reported having more formal relationships with neighborhood associations. Each city reported providing capacity-building resources and improvement grants to these participating associations in return for additional expectations related to the governance, transparency, and diverse representation of those associations.

Related to public engagement challenges among the selected cities, outreach to diverse perspectives and traditionally hard-to-reach populations, such as non-English speakers, was commonly reported. Another challenge noted by each city was the difficulty in measuring the success of their ongoing efforts at public and community engagement.

We noted that all cities reported established, centralized functions for informing the public, but some did not have consistent or well-structured ways to receive input from citizens. Finally, in several cities, we noted that plans and measures for public and community engagement extended to include volunteerism, voter participation, and the diversity of representation.

Dallas, Texas: In Dallas, communication is organized into two separate groups. There is a public information group that focuses on media and social media expression. This group is involved in informing citizens and also works on branding (Dallas recently went through a rebranding process). The other group is a strategic customer service department that tracks performance of city services and solicits resident input through surveys.

Kansas City, Missouri: In Kansas City, the public engagement approach is to make it easy for citizens to provide input. The city also seeks to improve the quality of the information shared with citizens by explaining, as much as possible, the reasoning behind policy issues. They use online videos, online town halls, social media, and text messages to reach residents. They also engage community groups to help with business planning through budgeting workshops as well as a "communications summit" where city staff hears from community organizations about their communications needs. As in Austin, Kansas City has a program for educating interested citizens on how the city operates and they maintain one site where links to all department social media accounts are located. Kansas City also includes public engagement goals as a part of their strategic business plan.

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minneapolis reported having a formal relationship with their neighborhood associations. The city provides resources (including funding) for the associations and, in return, the associations must comply with City guidelines. The city also funds grants for leadership development programs created and run by community organizations. As in Austin and Kansas City, Minneapolis conducts a city academy for residents.

Related to outreach, Minneapolis reported that they try to reach people where they gather. For example, the city engages with the South East Asian Community through a soccer league. Also, they reported being especially sensitive to Minneapolis communities with limited English skills. The city has employees who focus on outreach to those communities as well as communication plans to assist in reaching those groups in their native language.

Related to measurement, Minneapolis has a community engagement work plan which they periodically update. The yearly results report considers data such as voter turnout, the ethnic makeup of board and commission members, and citizen survey results to determine how successful their public engagement efforts have been.

Portland, Oregon: As in Minneapolis, Portland has a public engagement plan (which is included in their comprehensive plan). The three goals outlined in the plan are to increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities, strengthen community capacity, and increase community impact on public decisions. In 2010, they created a Public Involvement Development Council made up of city staff and citizens. The city stresses that government and community must be a true partnership and act as peers in decision-making.

As in Minneapolis, Portland supports their community organizations with funding and maintains standards for governance and representation. Originally, this support was provided to neighborhood associations. Over time, Portland discovered that not all people consider "community" as a geographic concept, so they expanded the support to include other identity

groups. In addition, they use a neighborhood small grants program as an incentive for neighborhoods to engage with city government.

Portland reported having tools for determining what level of public involvement is recommended for each project. Every item that goes before Council must either outline how the community was engaged or state that no engagement occurred. Portland also has a standing advisory council on community engagement. The council is made up of community members and city staff that make recommendations to Council.

In Portland, early involvement of groups is critical. They noted that there is no piecemeal way of creating a culture of engagement. Rather, it comes about through building community. Portland also noted that providing food is an important means of attracting people to community events, especially when they are held in the evening.

San Antonio, Texas: In San Antonio, the Communications and Public Affairs Office focuses primarily on informing the public through a variety of channels including billboards, utility bill inserts, and various social media platforms. Performance measures are focused largely on the quantity of outreach through these channels. This office also operates the city 311 system and recently developed an ambassador program to bring neighborhood leaders into 311 operations to better understand how it works and identify better ways to serve community needs.

San Antonio reported taking special care to ensure that all materials are available in Spanish and they work with district council members to identify representatives for hard-to-reach populations. In addition, San Antonio Promise Zone staff is used for outreach and helps with determining what methods are more successful at reaching target audiences in that zone.

Separate from the Communications and Public Information Office, SA2020 is a community vision created in 2010 for the future of San Antonio. An accompanying non-profit, also called SA2020, partners with the community with a mission of turning that vision into a reality. Civic engagement is included in SA2020 with a goal of increasing voter turnout, increasing the diversity of elected officials, and increasing volunteerism.

Vancouver, British Columbia: Vancouver has an Engaged City task force that was formed in 2012 made up of community leaders and supported by city staff and the Mayor's office. The task force was charged with providing recommendations on how to increase city residents' sense of belonging and inclusion and deepen their electoral engagement. Their recommendations included providing food at events, creating citizen academies, making 311 better for non-English speakers, and using property management companies to create better social connections among residents of condominiums.

Vancouver also has an employee who specializes in online engagement. Similar to Austin's SpeakUp Austin, Vancouver has an online citizen forum called Talk Vancouver. Vancouver also values face-to-face interaction at large events. They reported holding open houses at various city sites as well as sponsoring Pecha Kuchas, which are short presentations on a variety of topics. The city is also looking into ways of making the budgeting process more participatory. They receive feedback via surveys and have recently been adding the capacity to receive feedback in Mandarin.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCCIATION FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM:

iap2 public participation spectrum
developed by the international association for public participation

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advise and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
EXAMPLE TOOLS	• Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses	• Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings	• Workshops • Deliberate polling	• Citizen Advisory committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

SOURCE: City of Austin Community Engagement staff, January 2015

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