

XV. BENCHMARK SURVEY

A. OVERVIEW

A benchmark survey was sent to 12 communities with responses from 10 communities. The detailed results are shown in Appendix G.

The cities and communities were emailed the questionnaire shown in Appendix G and were contacted on several occasions to encourage a response. Data for cities or communities responded by the date of the draft report is shown in Appendix G.

Benchmarking can be an effective tool for helping organizations improve and we always encourage clients to visit other cities. However, true benchmarking requires a considerable amount of time and resources that could not be accommodated in this current study. Our experience with benchmarking using mail and telephone is mixed. It tends to have the following problems:

- It is difficult to get cities to respond. Everyone is busy and the city may not keep the kind of data requested;
- There is no independent verification of the data received. Even when we are doing a detailed study for a city, it is not unusual that data furnished to us is inaccurate; and
- In a multi-function study such as Austin's, benchmark data cuts across numerous departments or divisions, further complicating data collection.

In order to attempt to compensate for the above issues, we tried to simplify the benchmark parameters to make response as easy as possible. We should also point out that this study itself is, in effect, based on benchmark information. Zucker Systems has worked with some 170 cities and counties in 31 states on their permitting systems and has used this storehouse of data in our analysis and recommendations.

B. LARGE COMMUNITIES

The large communities included Austin; Columbus, OH; Charlotte, NC; Dallas, TX; Fort Worth, TX; Nashville, TN; Portland, OR; and San Antonio, TX. All but Charlotte responded. Features and our observations are as follows:

- **5. Population:** Ranged from a low of 583,776 in Portland to a high of 1,409 million in San Antonio. The average was 895,509, almost the same as Austin's population of 886,400.
- **6. Building Valuation:** Ranged from a low of 1.8 billion for Columbus and Nashville to a high of 3.2 billion in Dallas. *Austin's valuation of 3.7 billion was the highest of all.*

- **7. Discretionary Applications:** We feel the responses for this category are not reliable.
- **8. Zoning Cases:** Ranged from a low of 155 in Nashville to a high of 381 in Columbus. The average was 250 compared to Austin at 217.
- **9. New Single Family Applications:** Ranged from a low of 750 in Nashville to a high of 1,982 in San Antonio. The average was 1,604 compared to *Austin at 3,280 which was much higher than any of the other cities.*
- **10. New Commercial Building Applications:** Ranged from a low of 513 in Dallas to a high of 7,000 in Nashville (this data for Nashville could reflect a terminology issue). Excluding Nashville, the average was 658 compared to Austin's 280. Data in this category may or may not be reliable. To the extent it is, it would indicate that Austin's commercial sector may lag vs. the others. However, given Austin's high valuation, it could be an indication that Austin's commercial projects are larger.
- **11. Performance Standards Cut In Half For Cycles:** Columbus and San Antonio each indicate a yes to this question. Interestingly, both are former clients of Zucker Systems. Austin's cycles are not cut in half but are recommended in this study to do so.
- **12. Annual Amendments to Land Development or UDC:** Ranges from a low of 0 in Fort Worth to 20 in Nashville which is the same as 20 in Austin. The average is 7.
- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Building Code:** All but Nashville have interpretation manuals which is also the case in Austin.
- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Zoning Code:** Four communities have Zoning interpretation manuals three do not. Austin did not answer this question.
- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Engineering Standards:** Columbus, Fort Worth, and San Antonio have manuals. Austin and the others do not have such a manual.
- **14. Appealable Administrative Conditions:** True for all cities including Austin.
- **15. Commercial Design Standards:** Austin and all others except Dallas have commercial design standards. Dallas has some in selected areas.
- **16. First Plan review for Commercial:** Low of 7 days in Fort Worth, high of 35 days in San Antonio. Average is 23 compared to Austin at 21.
- **17. Second Check for Commercial:** Ranges from 30 days in Columbus to 7 days in Fort Worth. Austin is 14 days.

- **18. Single Family First Check:** *Austin is high at 14 day.* The average is 5 days with Nashville being the same day.
- **19. Single Family Second Check:** Austin is high at 14 days. Columbus and Fort Worth are 7 days, and San Antonio is one day.
- **20. Average Number of Inspections Per Day Per Inspector:** Austin ranges from 19.6 commercial to 28.9 residential. The average for the others is 14 with a low of 12 in Columbus to a high of 15 in San Antonio. Care must be taken in interpreting this data. In our experience, different communities count inspections in different ways.
- **21. Combination Inspectors:** Austin and all others use combination inspectors except for Dallas.
- **22. Plans Examiners and Inspectors Required to Be Certified:** Austin requires certification for inspectors but not for plans examiners. All the other communities except for Dallas require certification.
- **23. Impervious Cover Regulation:** All like Austin require regulation. Dallas and Portland have regulations only in selected areas.
- **24. Tree Preservation:** All like Austin have tree preservation
- **25. On Site Water Quality Treatment:** All like Austin require treatment. Dallas did not answer this question.
- **26. Massing and Scale of Single Family:** Like Austin, Columbus, Nashville, Portland, and San Antonio have such regulations. Dallas, and Fort Worth do not.
- **27. Staff Waivers for Minor Zoning Issues:** Austin, along with Fort Worth and San Antonio have such authority, the other do not.
- **28. Engineering Standards for Infrastructure:** All including Austin have such standards.
- **29. Number of Days for Site Plan First Check:** Austin is high at 28 days. San Antonio is low at 8 days. The average is 12 days.
- **30. Number of Days for Site Plan Second Check:** Austin at 14 days is about average. The low is 6 days in Columbus.
- **31. Site Plans Separate Rather Than Part of Building Permit Process:** They are separate process in Austin but site plan review is part of the Building Permit in all the other cities.
- **33. Subdivisions, Time From Application to Recording:** Austin at 6 months is about average. Columbus is low at 3 months and Dallas is high at 24 to 36 months.

- **34. Public Improvements Required Prior to Recording:** Required or bonded in all.
- **35. Number of Subdivision Plats Approved Administratively:** Austin is 108. Columbus is low with zero, San Antonio is high at 217.
- **36. Number of Subdivisions Per Year:** Austin at 269 is about in the middle with a low of 20 in Columbus and a high of 431 in San Antonio.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Building:** Austin is low at 66%, the average is 90%.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Engineering:** Austin is 9%, Columbus is low at 1%, San Antonio 13% and Fort Worth and Portland 100%.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Planning:** Austin is low at 2%. Fort Worth is high at 100%. The average is 40%. We note that Zucker Systems prepared the Fort Worth fee study.
- **38. Are Fees Isolated:** Austin fees go to the General Fund as do Fort Worth and Nashville. Columbus, Dallas, Portland, and San Antonio fees are isolated.
- **39. Phone Call and Email Policy:** Austin and most others are 24 hours. Columbus, Dallas, and Nashville have no policy.
- **40. Communication to Customers with Newsletters:** Austin and all others use newsletters with no answer from Columbus
- **40. Communication to Customers with Brochures:** Austin does not use brochures but Dallas, Fort Worth, Portland, and San Antonio do.
- **40. Communication to Customers via Social Media:** Only Nashville and San Antonio do but Austin does have a Facebook page.
- **40. Communication to Customers via the Web:** Austin and all other use the Web.
- **40. Communication to Customers via Monthly Meetings:** Austin does not but all the others do.
- **40. Communication to Customers With Press Releases:** Austin and all others except Columbus use press releases.
- **41. Communication to employees with Newsletters:** Austin and all others use newsletters with no answer from Columbus
- **41. Communication to employees with Brochures:** Only Fort Worth uses brochures.
- **41. Communication to employees via Social Media:** Only Nashville uses social media.

- **41. Communication to employees via the Web:** Austin and all other use the Web.
- **41. Communication to employees via Monthly Meetings:** All but Austin use monthly meetings. PDRD does have an all employee meeting twice a year.
- **41. Communication to employees With Press Releases:** Austin and Fort Worth use press releases.
- **42. Staff for the Development and Permitting Process:** We believe this data is not reliable.
- **43. and 44. Third Party Vendors for Building:** Austin and most cities do not use third party vendors for building except for Dallas (Green Building only) and Fort Worth (90% residential and 10% commercial).
- **43 and 44. Third Party Vendors for Engineering/Site Plans:** Austin and most cities do not except for Fort Worth.
- **43 and 44. Third Party Vendors for Subdivisions:** Austin and none of the cities use third party vendors for subdivisions.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Building:** Austin and all others have expediting for building except Nashville.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Engineering:** Austin does not but Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio do.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Subdivisions:** Austin does not but Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio do.
- **46. Integrated Departments:** Austin has 15 functions in one department. The average of the other cities is 12. Fort Worth is low at 5 and Dallas is high with 18 functions.
- **47. Plans Submitted Over The Internet:** Currently not available in Austin but it is being worked on. It is available in Nashville and is being worked on in five other cities.
- **48. On-line Permit Tracking:** Austin and all others have this feature.
- **49. Electronic Plan review:** Only Dallas and San Antonio have this feature.
- **50. Software: Austin is AMANDA:** Others Blue Beam, Brava, MPermitNow, and Onbase E.

Items of particular interest for Austin from the large cities included:

- 6. Austin had the highest building valuation of all the cities;
- 9. Austin's single family development at 3280 was the highest of all cities;
- 18. 19. Austin's first and second plan review time for residential at 14 days is the highest;

- 22. Certification for plan reviewers is not required in Austin but is in the other cities;
- 29. First site plan review time, Austin is the highest at 28 days with an average of 12 day;
- 31. Site plan review in Austin is a separate process while in the other cities it is part of the building permit process;
- 45. Three of the cities have expedited processes for engineering and subdivisions.
- 47 – 50. Internet Plans and Plan review are being worked on by all the cities.

C. SMALL COMMUNITIES

The small communities included Boulder, Carrollton, Plano, Round Rock and San Marcos. All but Carrollton and Plano responded. Small communities have the opportunity to function differently than large communities and this the comparisons tend to be less valuable for large cities. However, Round Rock and Sam Marcus may have some value since they are in the same market area as Austin. Features and our observations are as follows:

- **5. Population:** The average was 85,688 compared to Austin population of 886,400.
- **6. Building Valuation:** Ranged from a low of 1.5 billion for San Marcos and to a high of 44 million in Dallas. *Austin's valuation of 3.7 billion was the highest of all.*
- **7. Discretionary Applications:** The average was 43 compared to Austin at 799.
- **8. Zoning Cases:** Ranged from a low of 9 in San Marcos to a high of 60 in Boulder compared to Austin at 217.
- **9. New Single Family Applications:** Ranged from a low of 89 in Boulder to a high of 275 in San Marcos compared to Austin at 3,280.
- **10. New Commercial Building Applications:** Ranged from a low of 8 in Boulder to a high of 231 in Round Rock compared to 280 in Austin.
- **11. Performance Standards Cut In Half For Cycles:** Neither Austin or the comparable small communities cut second cycle times in half.
- **12. Annual Amendments to Land Development or UDC:** Ranges from a low of 3 in Boulder and Round Rock to 4 in San Marcos compared to 20 in Austin.
- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Building Code:** Only Boulder, like Austin has interpretation manuals for building.

- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Zoning Code:** Only Boulder has interpretation manuals for the zoning code.
- **13. Interpretation Manuals for Engineering Standards:** Both Boulder, Austin, and San Marcos have interpretation manuals.
- **14. Appealable Administrative Conditions:** True for Boulder and Round Rock as well as Austin;
- **15. Commercial Design Standards:** Austin and all others have commercial design standards.
- **16. First Plan review for Commercial:** Low of 7 days in San Marcos, high of 26 days in Boulder and Round Rock compared to Austin at 21.
- **17. Second Check for Commercial:** No second check is required in Round Rock with Boulder at 7-12 and San Marcos 5 to 7. Austin is 14 days.
- **18. Single Family First Check:** San Marcos is low at 4 days, Round Rock is 7, Boulder at 26 compared to Austin at 14. Both Boulder and Austin likely have more requirements than the other cities.
- **19. Single Family Second Check:** San Marcos is low at 4 days, Boulder at 7-12 compared to Austin at 14. Round Rock does not have a second check.
- **20. Average Number of Inspections Per Day Per Inspector:** Austin ranges from 19.6 commercial and 28.9 residential. The average for the others is 16. Care must be taken in interpreting this data. In our experience, different communities count inspections in different ways.
- **21. Combination Inspectors:** Austin and all others use combination inspectors.
- **22. Plans Examiners and Inspectors Required to Be Certified:** Austin requires certification for inspectors but not for plans examiners. All the other communities except for Round Rock require certification.
- **23. Impervious Cover Regulation:** All like Austin require regulation.
- **24. Tree Preservation:** All like Austin have tree preservation
- **25. On Site Water Quality Treatment:** Only San Marcos like Austin require treatment.
- **26. Massing and Scale of Single Family:** Like Austin, Boulder and Round Rock have such regulations. San Marcos does not.
- **27. Staff Waivers for Minor Zoning Issues:** All like Austin have this provision. San Marcos has an interesting provision allowing 10% for Directors.
- **28. Engineering Standards for Infrastructure:** All including Austin have such standards.

- **29. Number of Days for Site Plan First Check:** Austin is high at 28 days. San Marcos is low at 10 days, Round Rock at 15 days and Boulder at 21 days.
- **30. Number of Days for Site Plan Second Check:** Austin is at 28 days. San Marcos is low at 10 days, Round Rock at 15 days and Boulder at 15 days
- **31. Site Plans Separate Rather Than Part of Building Permit Process:** They are separate process in Austin, Round Rock and San Marcos but part of the Building Permit in Boulder.
- **33. Subdivisions, Time From Application to Recording:** Austin is up to 6 months. San Marcos is low at 45 day and Boulder is 90-180 days.
- **34. Public Improvements Required Prior to Recording:** Required in all or bonded.
- **35. Number of Subdivision Plats Approved Administratively:** Austin is 108. Round Rock is low with zero, Boulder 5-10 and San Marcos 25.
- **36. Number of Subdivisions Per Year:** Austin at 269 is higher than the three communities combined with Boulder 5-10, Round Rock 35-60 and San Marcos 40.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Building:** Only Boulder responded at 100%, Austin is at 66%.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Engineering:** Only Boulder responded at 50%, Austin is at 66%.
- **37. Percent of Budget From Fees for Planning:** Only Boulder responded at 50%, Austin is at 2%.
- **38. Are Fees Isolated:** Austin fees go to the General Fund as do San Marcos. The other two cities are isolated.
- **39. Phone Call and Email Policy:** Austin and all others are 24 hours.
- **40. Communication to Customers with Newsletters:** Austin and all others use newsletters.
- **40. Communication to Customers with Brochures:** Austin does not use brochures but Boulder does.
- **40. Communication to Customers via Social Media:** Austin does not use social media but Boulder and Round Rock do.
- **40. Communication to Customers via the Web:** Austin and all other use the Web.
- **40. Communication to Customers via Monthly Meetings:** Austin does not but Boulder does.

- **40. Communication to Customers With Press. Releases:** Austin and all others except Round Rock use press releases.
- **41. Communication to Employees with Newsletters:** Austin and Round Rock use newsletters.
- **41. Communication to Employees with Brochures:** None use brochures.
- **41. Communication to Employees via Social Media:** Only Boulder does.
- **41. Communication to Employees via the Web:** Austin and Boulder do.
- **41. Communication to Employees via Monthly Meetings:** Austin does not but all others do. PDRD does have an all employee meeting twice a year.
- **41. Communication to Employees With Press. Releases:** Only Austin and boulder do.
- **42. Staff for the Development and Permitting Process:** We believe this data is not reliable.
- **43. and 44. Third Party Vendors for Building:** Austin, Boulder and San Marcos do not but Round Rock does, <5%.
- **43 and 44. Third Party Vendors for Engineering/Site Plans:** Austin, and the three cities do not.
- **43 and 44. Third Party Vendors for Subdivisions:** Austin, Boulder and San Marcos do not but Round Rock does, <5%.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Building:** Only Austin does.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Engineering:** None, including Austin do.
- **45. Expedited Processes for Subdivisions:** None, including Austin do.
- **46. Integrated Departments:** Austin has 15 functions in one department. The average of the other cities is also 15.
- **47. Plans Submitted Over The Internet:** Currently not available in Austin but it is being worked on. It is available in San Marcos and is being worked on in Boulder.
- **48. On-line Permit Tracking:** Austin and all others have this feature.
- **49. Electronic Plan review:** Only San Marcos had this feature.
- **50. Software: Austin is AMANDA:** Others Blue Beam, and MyPermitNow.

Items of particular interest for Austin from the small cities included:

- Although normally small cities perform better than large cities, Austin compares favorably with these cities in many categories.
- 27. Waivers: San Marcos allows 10% by the Director.

- 29. And 30: Austin clearly takes the longest for site plan first and second check.