



Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is Soul-y Austin?

Soul-y Austin is a pilot initiative of the City of Austin Economic Development Department's emerging Commercial Stabilization Program. Under the pilot initiative, business owners receive a flexible set of tools to assist in the formation of merchants associations and organized commercial districts.

2. What problem is this program trying to solve?

Soul-y Austin seeks to strengthen the connections between businesses and the places they share through education on merchants associations. As Austin continues to grow and evolve, business owners can play an active role in influencing positive change and preserving the unique culture and environment of their respective districts as members of merchants associations.

3. How were the pilot areas chosen?

Pilot areas were chosen based on initial program funding and expressed interest from business owners in the formation of merchants associations. Initial funding will allow the City to shepherd three areas through this process so long as there is continued cooperation from business owners. The program is voluntary and has limited resources per year.

4. Who chose the pilot areas?

The pilot areas were chosen by the City of Austin Economic Development Department.

5. Will the City Council get to decide what areas can participate in this program?

At this time, the pilot initiative is limited to three commercial areas. In keeping with the purpose and goals of the pilot initiative, additional commercial areas may be considered under the larger (and emerging) Commercial Stabilization Program in 2016 based on the business community's expressed interest, not City Council.

6. How will this program ensure it does not promote gentrification?

The larger Commercial Stabilization Program will focus on businesses stability, retention, and support services as needed on a case by case basis.





7. Will the commercial areas in Imagine Austin centers be given priority?

Imagine Austin centers and corridors are eligible for participation should businesses express interest.

8. Concern: Merchants Associations will compete and Neighborhood Associations. Question: How will neighborhood plans be considered in these efforts?

An analysis on each area including existing plans is considered during the program.

9. How does this program differ from the IBIZ districts?

Soul-y Austin is a self-help pilot initiative that seeks to empower motivated, Austin-area brick-and-mortar businesses of all sizes and types throughout the city's commercial areas. This includes local, chain, and franchise businesses.

In addition to being all-inclusive, Soul-y Austin fosters independent collaboration between businesses and provides an array of support services towards the formation of self-sustaining merchants associations.

Support services include: education and coaching towards the formation of merchants associations; engagement of interested businesses; commercial district visioning, charetting, and planning; business development and training; business loans and music venue loans; marketing and promotion tools; monetary district activation awards; market analyses; Envision Tomorrow analyses; district assessments; and district videos.

An **IBIZ District** is geared towards independent, locally-owned businesses that exist in eight distinct areas throughout Austin. These businesses enjoy the benefits of shared marketing and promotion tools, monthly networking opportunities, and local business advocacy provided by the **Austin Independent Business Alliance (AIBA)**. For more information visit: <http://austinibiz.com/>.

The City's Economic Development Department supports and collaborates with the AIBA. AIBA currently receives funding from EDD.

10. How will EDD ensure they are working other City Departments?

Soul-y Austin will work with city staff from a number of departments including Transportation, Public Works, Planning and Zoning, etc.





11. How do Merchants Associations differ from Business Districts (PID's or BID's)?

A **merchants association** is a group of business owners that exists to anchor and stabilize neighboring businesses around beautification efforts, marketing and promotions, business retention, and economic development activities within a commercial district.

In Texas, there are two different nonprofit entity options available to merchants associations: (1) a nonprofit association and (2) a nonprofit corporation. Traditional merchants associations qualify for both of these organizational options, since they are typically engaged in work that is of a nonprofit nature, by providing civic services to benefit a community and utilizing revenues in furtherance of the merchants association's mission.

A **business improvement district** (BID) or **public improvement district** (PID) is a defined area within which businesses pay an additional tax in order to fund projects within the district's boundaries. The majority of taxpayers within a proposed BID/PID must petition the local government to form a BID/PID.

12. How and what will the city provide to the established Merchants Associations if formed?

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An activation award of \$10,000 with parameters on how it can be spent is provided to the districts once the Merchants Association is formed.

13. Where can I find information about successful Merchants Associations?

A best practice report on Merchants Associations is in the works.

14. Is there a script I can use to tell people about Merchants Associations?

Soul-y Austin has created a "Merchant's Script" to be utilized by the pilot areas business owners at this time.





15. How are Merchant Association dues established?

Merchant Association dues are established by the members of the association. Prior to the drafting of the association bylaws, members meet and decide on membership eligibility and dues.

