



Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs: An Overview

by Rondella Hawkins
Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs Officer
City of Austin

Rondella.Hawkins@austintexas.gov

512-974-2999

About TARA...

We are a small office advocating for the welfare of Austin residents.

Number of Employees: 14

2014-15 Departmental Budget: \$1,665,420

We are small office that collects a large amount of Right-of-Way (ROW) revenue for the General Fund and Public, Educational, and Governmental (PEG) fees for public access television.

2014-15 Budgeted Revenues:

ROW Revenues-General Fund \$34,748,263

Cable Access PEG Fees \$ 1,900,000

About TARA...

We are a small office with a diverse set of program areas. TARA...

- Ensures its residents are fairly compensated for the private use of our public rights-of-way by utility and telecomm providers
- Protects the interests of ratepayers in private utility rate cases
- Manages digital inclusion programs that bring access to the Internet and computer technology training opportunities to all community members
- Protects consumers from unfair predatory lending practices

Program Areas

- Franchise Management for use of public ROW
 - Consumer protection for cable tv and gas customers
- Gas and electric utility ratemaking activities
- Public, Educational, & Governmental Access TV
- Legislative Monitoring and Analysis
- City Credit Access Business (CAB) Ordinance Compliance
- TARA Contract Compliance reviews
- Claims/ Collection Services for Property Damages and Returned Checks
- Community Technology Initiative
 - Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan
 - Austin Free-Net
 - Grant for Technology Opportunities (GTOPs)
- Community Tech & Telecomm Cmsn Support



Mission and Goals for FY 16

Mission

The mission of Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs is to ensure that the City receives fair compensation for the private use of the public rights-of-way, to bring access to the Internet and computer technology to members of the community, and to protect consumers from utility rate increases and unfair predatory lending practices so that the welfare of Austin and its citizens is protected.

Mission and Goals for FY 16

Goals

Ensure the best and most remunerative use of public rights of way by negotiating franchise agreements, license agreements, and contracts that maximize revenue

Right-of-way revenue collections of \$37 million.

Bring the benefits of communications technology to all members of the community

80% of digital inclusion programs' participants improved their basic digital skills.

Advocate for the welfare of the citizens of Austin by monitoring credit access businesses in an effort to reduce abusive and predatory lending practices

115 Credit Access Business Registrations

New Items in the FY 16 Proposed Budget

- Add one FTE, a Regulatory Monitor, to assist in enforcement of the City Credit Access Business Ordinance
- A \$100,000 one-time budget increase (for FY 16 only) to review the upcoming natural gas rate case filing by Texas Gas Service

License and Franchise Administration

- The public ROW is valuable real estate
- Franchise Agreements for companies using our ROWs for private use include:
 - Gas – Texas Gas Service, Atmos Energy
 - Electric – Pedernales Co-op, Bluebonnet Co-op, Oncor
 - Telephone – line fees from AT&T, +65 other Certificated Telecommunications Providers (CTPs)
 - Wireless Communications – ROW License Agreements

Utility Ratemaking Responsibilities

- TARA manages ratemaking and rate reviews of gas and electric companies who operate in the City limits
- Texas Gas Service (TGS) is the primary natural gas distribution company in Austin
- Due to the complexity of the gas utility rate making process, TARA will hire outside consultants to assist with reviewing and analyzing the rate filings to ensure that any proposed rate increases are just, reasonable, and in the public interest

PEG Access

- Public, Educational and Governmental (PEG) access television services
- 7 access channels via state cable franchise
 - 3 Public access
 - 2 Government access (City, County)
 - 2 Educational access (AISD, ACC)

Public Access TV

Contract Management



- ChannelAustin, independent non-profit 501 (c)(3), has been contractor since 2005. Current contract expires 09/30/15.
- Austin Film Society's (AFS) proposal was selected from 5 proposals submitted in response to the RFP for the new public access management contract.
- Austin City Council will consider at their Aug 20, 2015 meeting the staff recommendation to negotiate and execute a new contract, effective Oct 1, 2015, with AFS.
- Contractor provides
 - Programming for 3 channels
 - Training and facilities for citizen producers
 - TV production work for hire
- Contractor manages and operates City's access facility
- TARA monitors performance



Public Access TV

Program

- Budget for FY 16:
 - Operations = \$475,000/yr.
 - CapEx = \$300,000/yr.
- Cable channels 10, 11, 16
- Facility and studios at 1143 Northwestern Ave.
- Ongoing production training program
- Supports Austin TV/Film community



Legislative and Regulatory Tracking and Analysis

- TARA monitors State and Federal laws and regulations that affect the City's administration and compensation for its rights of way and the other programs under TARA's responsibility
- TARA works closely with the City's Government Relations Office in these efforts

Legislative and Regulatory Tracking and Analysis

- Cable television and video services are regulated by the **Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUCT)** under the **Public Utility Regulatory Act (PURA)**
- Customer service standards are set by the **Federal Communication Commission (FCC)**
- Active member of **TATOA**
- Active member of **NATOA**



Compliance with Payday Lenders Ordinance

- The Credit Access Business (CAB) Ordinance became effective January 1, 2012
- Active enforcement began May 1, 2012
- Currently approximately 115 CAB registrations in Austin
- TARA provides public information and coordinates outreach efforts to inform consumers and lenders about the requirements of the ordinance

Claims Division

- Provides collection services for City departments for
 - Damages to City property
 - Returned checks
 - Delinquent accounts
- Reviews, researches, and investigates claims to determine third party liability
- Serves as the point of contact for payoff balances for civil judgments and judgment liens owed to the City



Community Technology Initiative

■ Purpose

- Foster digital opportunities and inclusion
- Address barriers to internet access, computer ownership and training
- Focus on communities with greatest need for technology access

■ Programs

- Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan
- Grant for Technology Opportunities (GTOPs)
- Austin Free-Net

Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan

City of Austin Vision & Purpose for the Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan

Vision

To ensure every Austin resident has an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society, accessing and using digital and communications technology.

Purpose

To address access and adoption of digital technology, to serve as a guiding document for providing digital inclusion opportunities in effecting the City's goals to ensure all Austin residents are served.

GTOPs



Grant for Technology Opportunities Program

GTOPs is a City of Austin funded matching grant program supporting local organizations in their efforts to include all our citizens in an emerging digital society.

- Outreach via [www. GTOPs.org](http://www.GTOPs.org) website & blog
- FY 15 Budget-\$200,000
- Established in 2000, since then (as of FY 2013)
 - Over \$1.64 million in grants awarded
 - Over \$4,714,230 in matching funds raised
 - At least 28,007 clients served

Austin Free-Net



- Non-profit partner with City, established in 1995
- City supports with a current annual contract of \$197,744 plus provides 2 FTEs for financial management and tech support
- Provides equitable access to technology and training
- Computer labs and classes open to all
- Focuses on underserved
- Helps people obtain jobs and participate as active citizens
- 19 public locations throughout the city
- www.austinfreenet.net

Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission

Commission Members - (Appointed By):

- Natalie Cofield – (Mayor Steve Adler)
- Betsy Greenberg – (Mayor Pro Tem Kathie Tovo, District 9)
- Piaki Ghosh – (Council Member Ora Houston, District 1)
- Narissa Johnson – (Council Member Delia Garza, District 2)
- Malcolm Yeatts – (Council Member Sabino “Pio” Renteria, District 3)
- Benjamin Graham – (Council Member Gregorio Casar, District 4)

Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission

Commission Members - (Appointed By):

- Dave Floyd – (Council Member Ann Kitchen, District 5)
- Lemuel Williams – (Council Member Don Zimmerman, District 6)
- Mateo Clark – (Council Member Leslie Pool, District 7)
- Tanner Vaughan – (Council Member Ellen Troxclair, District 8)
- Sumit DasGupta – (Council Member Sheri Gallo, District 10)