

Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs (TARA): An Overview

Presentation to Economic Opportunity Committee
October 12, 2015

Rondella Hawkins
Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs Officer
Rondella.Hawkins@austintexas.gov



Purpose of TARA

Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs (TARA) ensures the City and its residents are fairly compensated for private use by utility and telecommunications providers of the public rights-of-way, protects the interests of ratepayers in utility rate cases, manages digital inclusion programs that bring access to the Internet and computer technology and training to all community members, and protects consumers from abusive and predatory lending practices.

Program Areas

- **Right-of-Way Franchise & License Administration**
- **Utility Ratemaking (Gas and Electric)**
- **Legislative & Regulatory Monitoring**
- **Financial Advocacy Resources**
 - Compliance & Enforcement of Credit Access Business Ord.
- **Claims/Collections**
- **Public Access Media**
 - Public, Educational, & Governmental Access TV and capital funding management
- **Community Technology Initiative (CTI)**
- **Community Tech & Telecommunications Commission**

TARA's Budget Overview

	FY 15 Adopted	FY 15 CYE	FY 16 Approved
REVENUES: Right of Way (ROW) Fees - General Fund	\$ 34,748,263	\$ 36,944,287	\$ 37,481,431
REVENUES: Cable TV Access Revenue- Restricted Funds	\$ 1,900,000	\$ 1,900,000	\$ 1,900,000
EXPENSES: Total TARA Budget	\$ 1,665,420	\$ 1,632,841	\$1,718,951
Number of FTEs	14 FTEs	14 FTEs	15 FTEs

Program Areas

ROW Franchise and License Administration

- Natural Gas & Electric – Municipal franchises
- Cable and Video – State franchises
- Local Telephone Service: Line fees from 50+ State Certificated Telecommunications Providers
- Wireless Communications Providers

Legislative & Regulatory Monitoring

- ROW control and fair compensation and public interest

Utility Ratemaking & Complaints

- Manage rate reviews of natural gas and electric companies
- Mediate complaints of customers

Financial Advocacy Resources (Credit Access Business Program)



- The Credit Access Business (CAB) Ordinance places restrictions on loans to minimize predatory lending practices and to reduce amount of fees and interest paid by borrowers
- TARA charged with development and implementation of program to monitor and enforce compliance with 1 FTE
- Registration and enforcement began May 1, 2012 – Texas Office of Credit Commissioner CAB Licensing began on January 1, 2012
- Currently approximately 104 CAB businesses in Austin
- TARA provides public information and coordinates outreach efforts to inform consumers and CAB's about the requirements of the ordinance

Efforts to Improve Enforcement



- Reduce notification time to City of any material change in business operations from 45 to 10 days
- Establish a process for registration revocation and appeal
- Establish clear requirements that CABs provide lending transaction reports filed with the Texas Consumer Credit Commissioner in a format prescribed by the City
- Improve loan information that CABs provide borrowers
- Clarify that each loan obligation is fully repaid in no more than four installments
- Require the posting of consumer credit counseling info
- Staff will bring proposed Code amendments to Council in November/December

Efforts to Improve Enforcement



Administrative Rulemaking currently underway to:

- Establish income verification standards on loans – require use of current income documents
- Require borrower's rights poster and the contents of the poster to be displayed – accompanies the proposed code amendment
- Clarify reporting requirements in current ordinance - accompanies the proposed code amendment
- Adoption of rules at the end of 2015

Additional FTE – Regulatory Monitor funded for 9 months

Financial Advocacy Resources & Community Engagement



- Consumer Support and Assistance
 - Complaint investigations and loan reviews
 - On-site reviews and case referrals to Municipal Court – 9 cases referred to Municipal Court
- Public Service Announcement and outreach campaign to reach consumers – working with Communications & Public Information Office
- Identify and support local efforts and opportunities favorable to consumers
- Attend Council district meetings, participate in Restore Rundberg initiative and provide informational materials and resources

Credit Access Business Ordinance Activity



Texas cities with business and zoning ordinances:

- There are currently 27 cities with ordinances regulating business activity
- There are currently 15 cities with land use/zoning ordinances
 - Under a separate Council action from CAB ordinance, the City Council adopted stricter zoning regulations on the location of new CAB businesses

Claims/Collections Services

- Provides claims 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: 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.

Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs)

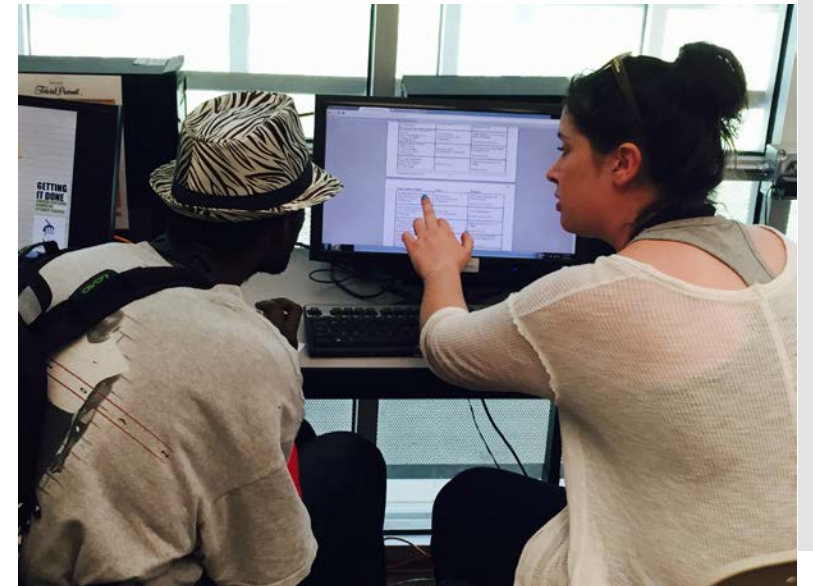
- GTOPS is a **matching fund grant program** that began in 2001 supporting local organizations in their efforts to include all our citizens in an emerging digital society
- GTOPs is currently funded at **\$200,000 annually**
- Grants between **\$10,000 to \$25,000** for capital and operating expenses and requires 1:1 matching funds (cash, in-kind and volunteer hours)
- Since its inception, GTOPs funding of \$1,865,000 has been a match to more than **\$6.5 million** for community programs



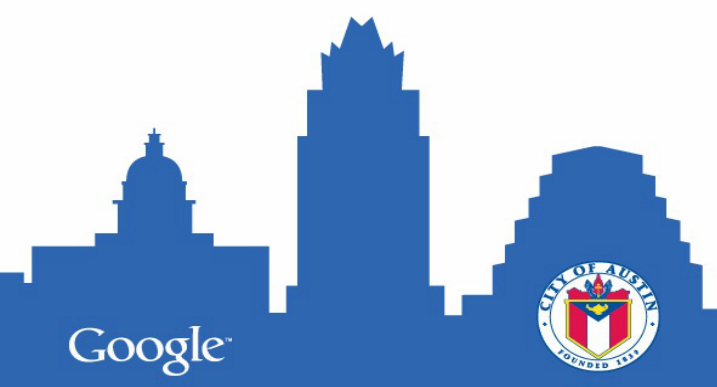
Austin Free-Net

Independent (501c3) non-profit
started by City in 1995 to provide
public access and training

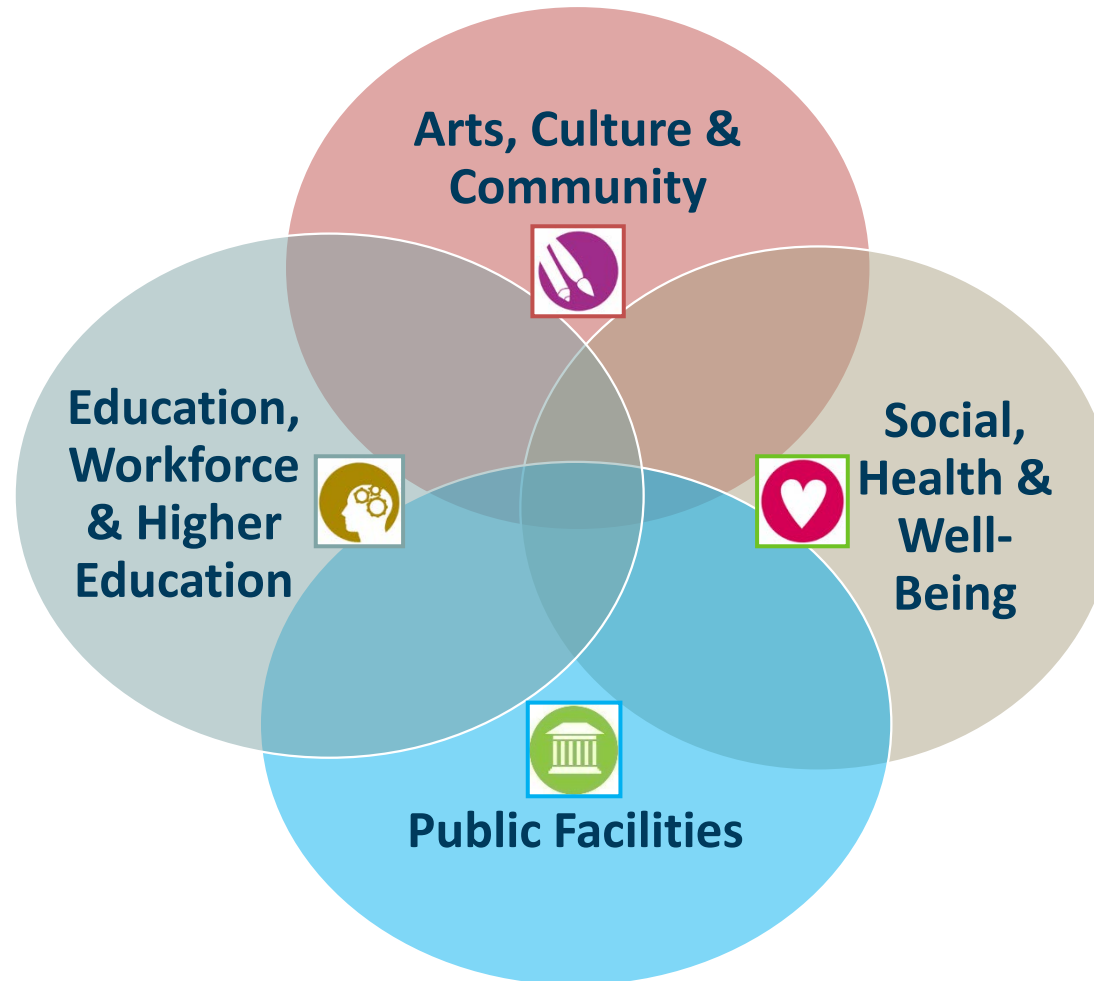
- City's flagship digital inclusion organization providing:
- Public Access Computer Labs
- Computer training
- Digital Literacy Coalition Lead Agency
- 11 Public Access (City-funded locations) supported with computers and trainers



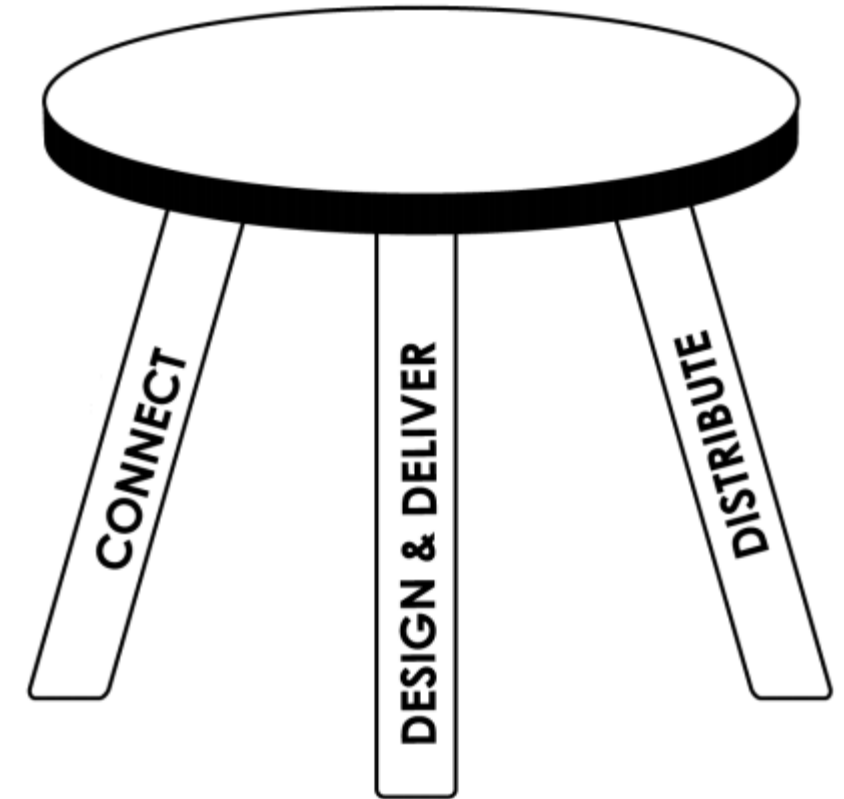
Community Connections Program



The City partnered with Google Fiber for Community Connections and selected **100 social good locations** across the city to receive a free gigabit Internet connection that will **spark social innovation**.



“Unlocking the Connection” Partnership with Housing Authority of the City of Austin



Public Access TV Facility and Community Media

- Budget for FY 16:
 - Operations = \$475,000/yr.
 - CapEx = \$300,000/yr.
- Cable channels 10, 11, 16
(AT&T channel 99)
- Contractor provides:
 - Management of facility and studios at 1143 Northwestern Avenue
 - Programming for 3 channels
 - Training and facilities for citizen producers and community based organizations & local non-profits
 - State of the art video production equipment available for check-out



**AUSTIN
FILM
SOCIETY**

Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission

Commission Members - (Appointed By):

- Natalie Cofield – (Mayor Steve Adler)
- Betsy Greenberg – (Mayor Pro Tem Kathie Tovo, District 9)
- Pinaki 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)
- 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)

TARA Contact

Rondella Hawkins, TARA Officer
Rondella.Hawkins@austintexas.gov

TARA Mainline: 512.974.2999
tarainfo@austintexas.gov

124 W. 8th Street, Suite 210
Austin, TX 78701

[@COADigitalInclusion](http://www.austintexas.gov/departments/telecommunications)

