

Online Access to City Services



Objective

The objective of this audit was to determine if the City's online services are meeting residents' basic needs.

Background

The City's website, [Austintexas.gov](http://austintexas.gov), brings together the City's online presence, which is put together by many participants.

- Individual departments are responsible for managing online content related to their department.
- The Communications and Technology Management department is responsible for the operation of the City's website, including some department pages.
- The Corporate Public Information Office is responsible for website branding and the City's content management system.

A 2015 report by Deloitte grouped online transactions into five categories based on their complexity. These transactions can be completed in person, over the phone, through the mail, or online. Deloitte found that, generally, online transactions are less expensive for governments and residents. Other benefits include increased efficiency, greater convenience, and saved time.

What We Found

The City of Austin offers residents many online services, such as making payments or downloading information. However, barriers prevent some City departments from offering services such as online registrations and applications, and there is no citywide strategy for offering services online. Compared to residents of other cities, Austin residents can perform the same basic online transactions, although finding the services on the City's website may require additional steps to complete. This, coupled with the website not meeting accessibility guidelines, means that services are more difficult for people of all abilities to find and use.

The City offers residents online transactions ranging from information downloads to online payments. However, barriers prevent departments from offering some services, and there is no citywide strategy for offering services online.

- Many City departments offer residents at least one transaction type service online. This includes the ability to pay for things such as utility bills, fines/tickets, permits, and site registrations. Other services offered online include the ability to provide feedback or make complaints, submit applications, and register for services.
- Some departments indicated they would like to offer more services online, but reported barriers such as restrictive policies, lack of resources, and security concerns.
- There is no citywide strategy or plan for offering services online. Departments select the services and information they offer through several different methods, and no central authority in the City coordinates these efforts.
- The City also does not have a program for redesigning and updating the City's website on an ongoing basis. Also, there is also no recurring funding for this function.

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What We Found, Continued

Residents can perform the same basic online transactions as residents in other cities, although finding the services on the City's website is harder, and may require additional steps to complete.

- Some information and services were not easily found by searching the City's website. In many cases, additional steps are necessary to complete the transaction.
- Websites for other cities provided more links to popular services that were easier to find on their home page.
- If residents have difficulty locating and accessing key online services, they may have to physically travel to departments instead. This leads to increased costs for residents and increased resource costs for the City.

The City's website does not meet accessibility guidelines that would help users of all abilities find and use online City services.

- Guidelines for building web pages that are accessible for persons with disabilities describe four principles for accessibility. The City's homepage had issues with all of these principles:
 - *Perceivable* - The City's homepage does not have sufficient contrast between text and background in several areas, including the main content lists on each department's page and the footer on each page.
 - *Operable* - Pages provided enough time to read content and were not designed in a way to cause seizures. However, users could not fully navigate one page from a keyboard and some pages did not provide clear link for navigation.
 - *Understandable* - Some pages contained text above a middle school reading level, which is the highest level recommended by the American with Disabilities Act.
 - *Robust* - The website is not fully compatible with current adaptive technology.

What We Recommend

- The Chief Information Officer work with the City Manager to develop and implement a strategic plan for offering online services.
- The City Manager work with the Chief Information Officer, Chief Communications Director, and other key stakeholders to assign responsibility for the City's website.
- The Chief Information Officer (or person designated through the implementation of the second recommendation) should work with departments to increase the number of services offered online and ensure they are quick and easy to find.
- The Chief Information Officer (or person designated through the implementation of the second recommendation) should work with stakeholders to implement a plan to ensure the City's online services are accessible for people with all abilities.