

City of Austin Budget Office

Increasing & Maintaining Customer Satisfaction

Final Report

March, 2011

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I. Background

Commitment to Customer Service

The City of Austin has made a commitment to delivering high quality services to Austin residents. Diligent commitment to that goal is paying off.

The City's recent customer satisfaction survey (2010 Citizen Survey) documents *considerable success*. The report notes that "the City of Austin is setting the standard for performance among large U.S. cities." (See: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/budget/citizensurvey.htm>).

Though residents express satisfaction with the majority of the programs and services the City of Austin provides, the research did identify a relatively **small number of areas of concern**.*

Note. *In this context, an area of "concern" is one that citizens assign a greater level of importance than satisfaction, even though satisfaction may be higher than "normal" compared to other cities for the same issue or higher than other issues in the 2010 Citizen Survey.

I. Background

Budgeting Process

The City of Austin Budget Office facilitates a **data driven budget process that takes into account citizens' values and priorities**. Through the application of rigorous survey and focus group research, the Budget Office seeks to identify ways to both: **a) sustain or enhance customer satisfaction; and b) manage the City's budget effectively and responsibly**.

The 2010 Citizen Survey was quite valuable in providing comprehensive, city-wide feedback on a variety of aspects of citizen satisfaction with city services. However, the survey also raises, but leaves unanswered, several questions. The City of Austin Budget Office contracted with M. Crane & Associates, Inc. to **conduct focus group discussions with citizens in order to:**

- gain an **increased understanding of citizen "concerns"** about selected city services; in particular, to gain greater clarity regarding the meaning or specifics of these concerns
- identify preliminary, **potential remedies**, if possible/feasible, to some areas of citizen "concern"
- **sharpen the measurement tools** for future surveys in order to make the benchmarking and tracking process more robust (methodological recommendations are provided under separate cover).

I. Background

Research Topics

The specific topics were identified by **reviewing all areas of concern** from the 2010 Citizen Survey. Each was examined in terms of several **“filters”**:

- The extent of the concern (the reported importance of the matter to citizens relative to the reported level of satisfaction)
- The potential for focus group research to provide better insight into the nature of citizen concerns and, possibly, their thoughts about potential remedies
- The potential to address concern areas through operational changes in the upcoming budget cycle

On the basis of this approach, the following were identified as **top priorities** for the research:

- Perceived value for **city taxes and fees**
- The nature of concerns about **police services** overall
- The nature of concerns about **parks**, specifically safety and appearance
- The nature of concerns about **code enforcement**

II. Research Methodology

Approach

In order to gather in-depth qualitative input from the diverse residents of Austin -- home owners and renters, men and women, the young and old, various race and ethnic groups, length of residence in Austin, and presence of children-- **6 focus groups** (each with 9-10 participants) were conducted. The 59 research participants, who were compensated for their participation, were not informed before or during the research that it was being conducted on behalf of the City of Austin.

Each focus group was comprised of participants from one of the **6 different geographic areas of Austin**: Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, Southeast, Central West and Central East.

Each focus group discussion was approximately 100 minutes in duration. The 6 focus groups were conducted at a professional focus group facility in Austin between **January 25 and January 27, 2011**.

Note. Focus group research has limitations. It is a purely qualitative research method that is designed to obtain context, texture, depth and detail. It is a good method to gain insight into “why” people hold their opinions. The results are not subject to statistical analysis or statistical inference.

II. Research Methodology

Profile of Focus Group Participants

Gender

Male	42%
Female	58%

Age

<34	34%
35 - 54	42%
>54	23%

Race / Ethnicity

White/Anglo	54%
Hispanic	25%
African American	20%

Home Ownership

Own	69%
Rent	31%

Length of Residence in Austin

Up to 10 years	18%
Ten or more years	81%

Presence of Children < 18 in Household

Yes	39%
No	61%

Note. The six focus groups included 59 participants in total. Totals above may not add to 100% due to rounding error.

III. Research Findings

City Taxes & Fees

- Perceived Value
- Expectations Going Forward

Overall Austin Police Services

- Meaning
- Bases of Opinions
- Increasing Satisfaction

Safety in City Parks and Park Facilities

- Meaning
- Bases of Opinions
- Increasing Satisfaction

Compliance with City Codes

- Voluntary Compliance Guidelines
- Increasing Awareness

Perceived Value Received for City Taxes and Fees = Most Say Moderate to Good

Favorable Comments

- *"It's a **good city to live in**, compared to other cities."*
- *"I think **the City has a vision for what a future Austin should be.**"*
- *"The City is trying to make Austin an appealing and comfortable city . . . By spending an extra nickel for things like libraries, parks, services for the disabled. . . they focus on things that really matter."*
- *"You can't beat **our parks.**"*
- *"I use the running trail and parks and recreation programs."*
- *"**Swimming pools** -- I'm a regular at Barton Springs and Deep Eddy."*
- *"I think the **emergency response and protective services**, like the police and fire departments, do an excellent job."*
- *"I love **single-stream recycling.**"*

Notes. Most 2010 Citizen Survey respondents also indicated that they receive moderate to good value for city tax dollars and fees. Focus group participants from the west side were generally more satisfied than those from the east side.

Perceived Value Received for City Taxes and Fees = Most Say Moderate to Good

Favorable Comments - continued

- *“Fantastic **public library** system. Children’s programs at the library are very good.”*
- *“Quality of life things like the **arts, music festivals, events.**”*
- *“Nice **airport.**”*
- *“The **sanitation services** keep the area clean.”*
- *“**Water quality and cost** are reasonable.*
- *“The City helps out with **energy efficiency with rebates.**”*
- *“For the **311** system, you really get the people you need to talk to and they respond to whatever it is you have a problem with.”*

Notes. There was some confusion on both the sources of city taxes and fees and the nature of city expenditures. In evaluating the value they receive for City taxes and fees, a number of participants referenced services provided by Capital Metro, the State of Texas, and Austin area public schools.

Perceived Value Received for City Taxes and Fees = Most Say Moderate to Good

Unfavorable Comments

- *“We could do so much more for **transportation**.”*
- *“Poor quality roads – bad **potholes**.”*
- *“We have **almost zero police protection** in our neighborhood.”*
- *“**Taxes are way out of line** compared to other cities.”*

Expectations Regarding City Tax Dollars and Fees = Nearly All Expect an Increase

Bases for Expectations

- *“With **the state budget shortfall**, a lot of the costs that the state was covering will be passed downward and covered at the city level.”*
- *“The **population is increasing** and there is more strain on public services, infrastructure and repairs.”*
- *“General inflation.”*
- *“Just **the cost of keeping the doors open** and trucks on the street, the basics like energy and fuel costs are going up.”*
- *“They get money through **the sales tax**, but if no one has money to buy stuff, they are going to have to raise property taxes.”*
- *“The people in Austin want services that the people in Texas are not willing to pay for -- things people in Austin consider important.”*
- *“The **money has to come from somewhere**.”*

Notes. During the days and weeks preceding the focus groups, the necessity for statewide budget cuts and the possibility of Austin area school closures were under discussion. Media attention to budget deficits of other public entities was widespread.

Meaning of “Overall Austin Police Services”

= Numerous & Variable

Various Interpretations

PUBLIC SAFETY

- *“Keeping public order and safety.”*
- *“Safety in neighborhoods.”*
- *“They should protect and serve the community.”*
- *“Police presence.”*
- *“911 emergency response.”*
- *“Traffic control.”*

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- *“Ideally, community partner and resource.”*
- *“Neighborhood watch.”*
- *“Meeting with neighborhood groups.”*
- *“Blue Santa.”*

CRIME PREVENTION, INVESTIGATIONS, & RESPONSE

- *“Crime prevention.”*
- *“Crime deterrence.”*
- *“Investigating crimes.”*
- *“Helping prosecute crimes.”*
- *“Victims services.”*

Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services = Variable

Bases of Favorable Views

- *“The police are quick to **respond** to 911 calls.”*
- *“If you call them and you need the police, they are there. It doesn’t take a long time; they’re pretty fast.”*
- *“My own house was burglarized and they got there quickly and were very caring.”*
- *“They do seem to be a presence so **I feel safe** in my area.”*
- *“All of the times I have ever interacted with them have been good.”*
- *“They do a great job and the crime rate is low compared to most other cities.”*
- *“They [Austin Police Department] put forth the effort to be more **responsible and accountable**.”*
- *“Our **neighborhood group** requested a meeting with the police and they did a really good job of telling people how to be safe and took 45 minutes of questioning.”*

Notes. The 2010 Citizen Survey also reports that citizens’ satisfaction with overall police services is mixed. Focus group participants from the west side were more satisfied than those from the east side. Generally speaking, participants expressed their views about police services with passion and conviction, especially those with unfavorable views. Many participants on the west side and nearly all participants on the east side based their evaluations on personal experiences.

Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services = Variable

Perceived Differences in Officers' Attitudes

- *"The **attitude from the police is mixed**; sometimes very negative, sometimes very positive."*
- *"I've met **some that were nice**."*
- *"Some are just ridiculously **rude** and pull you over to harass you for no reason."*
- *"They handle routine things pretty good -- **if you get the right cop**."*
- *"Some cops are absolutely fabulous but then you have those bad ass guys who are into the power trip."*
- *"Certain police officers feel like it's the old West."*
- *"**Some think they're God**."*
- *"Some incidences in the past have been embarrassing for the police but **you can't hold the whole department accountable for a few people's actions**."*
- *"They're controversial."*

Notes. Many participants perceive variation among police officers.

Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services = Variable

Bases of Unfavorable Views

SLOW RESPONSE; VARIABLE RESPONSE TIME

- *"I had a personal experience with a very **slow response rate.**"*
- *"They **respond to Central Austin quicker** than they respond to other areas."*

QUESTIONABLE PRIORITIES

- *"They spend **too much time writing tickets** and not enough time preventing crime."*
- *"You see 5 or 6 police officers at a fast food joint, and it might be their break, but when you see it over and over again, you wonder if this is the best use of our force."*

EXCESSIVE FORCE / ABUSE OF POWER

- *"They shot and killed too many young people in our city."*
- *"**They shoot first and ask questions later.**"*
- *"They stick together and **won't admit their culpability.**"*

DISCRIMINATION

- *"Although my personal interactions have been fine, they have not been that way for my son and his friends."*
- *"They do have a tendency to **discriminate against certain age groups, genders, and ethnicities.**"*
- *"How you're treated **depends on the area you're in.**"*

Increasing Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services Requires 3 Broad Changes

Better Interpersonal Skills

- *“They need to **give the impression that they care** about people’s personal situations.”*
- *“They **should be respectful and polite** in any situation unless they’re give good reason to act otherwise.”*
- *“Not so cocky.”*
- *“They should be less confrontational.”*
- *“**Less harassment** of young African Americans.”*
- *“More and better training on how to deal with situations and people.”*
- *“They should provide **more diversity training** for the police and then community outreach to show they have done it.”*

Notes. There were numerous suggestions for improved training of various types. Specific references were made to diversity issues --especially race/ethnicity and age. Participants also suggested training to improving interpersonal skills, emphasizing the importance of showing respect and listening. Also mentioned was training to enhanced neighborhood understanding.

Increasing Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services Requires 3 Broad Changes

Engaging with the Community in Collaborative Partnership

- *“More involvement with the community in high crime areas. Get to know the people.”*
- *“There needs to be **more community involvement**. If you know the area you serve and the people in it, it’s easier to tell who’s right from who’s wrong.”*
- *“I’d like to see **more community partnership** and see the cops helping the community.”*
- *“**Listen to the community** and learn their needs.”*
- *“**Educating the public on the many roles the police play and ways they help the community.**”*

Increasing Satisfaction with Overall Austin Police Services Requires 3 Broad Changes

Increased Presence
Where Most Needed

- *“More police presence in high crime neighborhoods”*
- *“Better prevention of crime in certain high crime areas by increasing patrols.”*
- *“We need more officers as the city grows.”*
- *“More bicycle police in the neighborhoods.”*

Meaning of Safety in City Parks and Park Facilities

=

Clean, No Crime,
No Personal Injury,
Appropriate Use

Various Interpretations

NO CRIME

- *"No fear of being attacked."*
- *"Ability to go there are be safe -- not harassed or assaulted."*
- **"No drugs."**
- *"No vandalism."*
- *"Patrolled by police night and day."*

GROUNDS AND EQUIPMENT

- *"[Whether] the grounds and equipment are **well-maintained.**"*
- *"**Pools and playscapes** are safe."*
- *"Structural safety of trails and paths."*

CLEAN

- *"Restrooms that are clean are safe."*
- *"No dog poop."*
- *"No needles or broken glass."*

USAGE

- *"The presence of people using the parks as intended."*
- *"**Nice facilities** where families can gather."*
- *"No lewd behavior."*

Satisfaction with Perceived Safety = Moderate to High in City Parks and Park Facilities

Bases of Favorable Views

- *“The parks are very pretty.”*
- *“The **park police** are very nice and helpful.”*
- *“The parks are close to Austin landmarks, so they are **good tourist attractions**.”*
- *“The big city parks (like Zilker) get lots of use.”*
- *“Multiple activities are available [which attract more people].”*
- *“I typically frequent parks where there are lots of people around. . . .the higher the usage, the safer the park is.”*
- *“Everyone feels safer in parks with more people around.”*

Notes. Findings of the 2010 Citizen Survey were similar; 65% were satisfied with the safety in City parks and park facilities. The focus groups revealed that park evaluations are based largely on visual observations and/or personal visits to parks. Most focus group participants considered major city parks generally safer than neighborhood parks.

Satisfaction with Perceived Safety = Moderate to High in City Parks and Park Facilities

Bases of Unfavorable Views

LACK OF CLEANLINESS

- *"Trash."*
- *"Too much dog poop."*
- *"Broken glass and needles."*
- *"Bathrooms are dirty."*

CRIME/SAFETY CONCERNS

- *"At night, they aren't safe."*
- *"There is crime there with the **homeless population and harassment.**"*
- *"There are **car thefts.**"*
- *"**Drugs and drug dealing** have a negative impact on the parks."*

USAGE AND CONDITION

- *"Vulgarity."*
- *"We have **nothing positive, like equipment and facilities, to do** at the [neighborhood] park."*
- *"[The City gives] less attention to small parks. And less maintenance."*

Notes. Focus group participants from the Northeast side were the least satisfied with the safety of their neighborhood parks.

Increasing Satisfaction with Safety = Patrols Matter Most in City Parks and Park Facilities

Several Suggestions

INCREASED PATROL

- *“More **presence of someone in a uniform** related to the park, **on bikes** would be great.”*

OTHER SAFETY FEATURES

- *“Add some of those emergency call boxes.”*
- *“They could put in more lighting and make it solar.”*

PARK USAGE - ATTRACT FAMILIES

- *“More programs for children, elderly, and families.”*
- *“If you **attract more families**, people doing bad stuff won’t come because they know there will be people there.”*
- *“More planned activities.”*

CLEAN UP

- *“Clean up the syringes and glass on the ground.”*
- *“Clean the bathrooms.”*

Notes. Participants widely embraced the concept of park rangers in lieu of police. They want a uniformed presence with the potential to call for assistance if needed. Improved cleanliness and the presence of families using the parks as intended increase a park’s appeal and perceptions that it is a safe place.

Views Regarding Time to Comply with City Codes

= Most Want Timely Compliance,
With Modest Extensions When
Hardships Exist

High Weed Lots

Nearly all believe **2-4 weeks** is an adequate time to require citizens to comply with the citation.

Junk/Debris

Nearly all believe **60-90 days** is an adequate time to require citizens to comply with the citation.

Dilapidated Structures

Nearly all believe **3-6 months** is an adequate time to require citizens to comply with the citation.

Notes. Illustrative but not necessarily “representative” photos were displayed so that focus group participants could see examples of each type of violation.

Views Regarding Time to Comply with City Codes

= Most Want Timely Compliance,
With Modest Extensions When
Hardships Exist

Considerations Regarding Compliance

THOROUGH ASSESSMENT

- *“They [the City] should investigate the situation before they become aggressive.”*

CONSIDER LEVEL OF DANGER

- *“They should be more aggressive if the situation is dangerous.”*

CONSIDER HARDSHIP

- *“They should be **flexible if there is hardship.**”*
- *“The should work with them if there is hardship Providing [financial] assistance.”*

Increasing Awareness

- *“Use the City’s TV channel.”*
- *“Bulletin boards.”*
- *“Enclose flyers in the utility bills.”*
- *“Use the DRs [APD District Representatives].”*
- *“Explain at Neighborhood meetings.”*

Notes. Many participants expressed low levels of understanding about code compliance issues. Also, some suggested that investigations should result in a plan to achieve compliance. The City should offer recommendations about the resources available for property owners to come into compliance with the code.

IV. Summary and Recommendations

Overview.

The City of Austin's Budgeting Process is designed to take into account the findings of this and other research capturing residents' views and priorities in order **to a) sustain or enhance customer satisfaction; and b) manage the City's budget effectively and responsibly.**

The findings of this qualitative research, in combination with prior quantitative research, offer **the following insights and implications for sustaining or enhancing customer satisfaction.**

IV. Summary and Recommendations

PERCEPTIONS OF OVERALL VALUE FOR CITY TAXES AND FEES

- For the most part, citizens currently believe they receive **moderate to good value for Austin City taxes and fees.**
- **The vast majority expect City taxes and fees to increase** in the next year or two.
- More communication to delineate of the scope of City services and responsibilities may **improve public understanding** of the City's budget and expenditures.

IV. Summary and Recommendations

PERCEPTIONS OF OVERALL POLICE SERVICES

- Focus group participants expressed widely divergent views regarding their satisfaction with overall Austin police services.
- They more often identified the **need for improving police officers' interpersonal skills and community partnerships** than increasing police presence.
- We recommend **conducting additional research** as needed to clarify citizens' perceptions of overall Austin Police services.
- Specifically, **we recommend**:
 - ✓ Identifying and conducting appropriate **training** for officers.
 - ✓ Identifying and implementing effective **outreach activities** that are sensitive to the differences among neighborhoods, **especially among communities of the east side of Austin.**

IV. Summary and Recommendations

PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY IN PARKS AND PARK FACILITIES

- Focus group participants care about the City's parks.
- They hold divergent views about park safety. **Safety includes concerns about crime, maintenance of equipment, cleanliness, and park usage.**
- Generally, they consider the large city parks safer than smaller, neighborhood parks.
- We recommend that the City improves residents' perceptions regarding park safety, by:
 - ✓ **Increasing the presence of park rangers**
 - ✓ **Keeping parks clean**
 - ✓ **Keeping parks free of crime**
 - ✓ **Encouraging family activities**

IV. Summary and Recommendations

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING CODE COMPLIANCE

- Focus group participants expressed rather low levels of understanding of City Codes and Code Compliance. Increasing awareness will enable residents to participate more effectively.
- Focus group participants believe **the City should enforce timelines** to achieve compliance with codes.
- They also want the City to support property owners, as needed, by assisting in the development of plans to achieve compliance.
- They seek flexibility in compliance in instances characterized by hardship where they believe that extra support and some leniency with respect to timelines to achieve compliance may be appropriate.

Appendix

Research Methodology

Number and Composition of Focus Groups

Each focus group was composed of residents of one of Austin's 6 neighborhoods. One focus group discussion was conducted for each of the following neighborhoods (these definitions correspond with those used in other research):

- Central East Austin (78702, 78721, 78722, 78723, 78724, 78725)
- Central West Austin (78701, 78703, 78705, 78751, 78756)
- Southeast Austin (78617, 78719, 78741, 78742, 78744, 78747)
- Southwest Austin (78704, 78733, 78735, 78736, 78739, 78745, 78746, 78748, 78749, 78784, 78766, 78652)
- Northwest Austin (78717, 78726, 78727, 78729, 78730, 78731, 78750, 78757, 78758, 78759, 78734, 78613, 78732)
- Northeast Austin (78660, 78752, 78753, 78754, 78753, 78728)

Customer Satisfaction

Customer Satisfaction is Complex and Multi-faceted

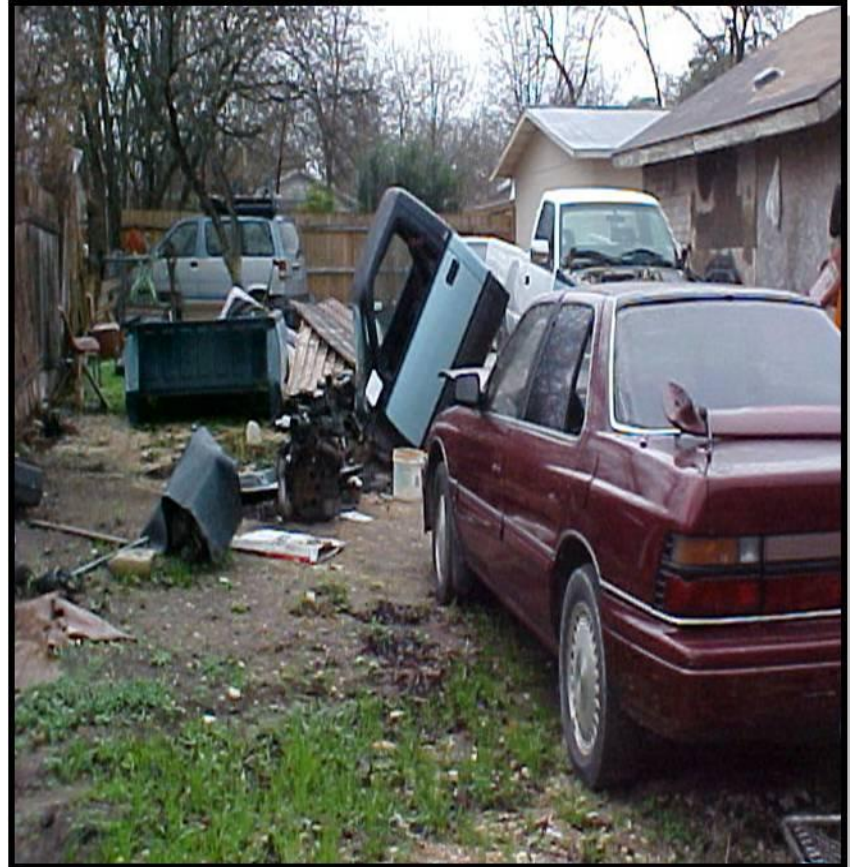
Customer satisfaction is complex and depends on many factors. It is sometimes defined as the difference between expectations and experience. But this oversimplifies the challenge. Building and retaining customer satisfaction can be achieved by examining a range of contributing factors that include, but are not limited to, modifications to the service itself. Such factors include customers' knowledge/understanding, perceptions of accessibility, perceptions of responsibility, perceptions of fairness, perceptions of service scope, perceptions of delivery, and so forth.

Visual Displays for Code Compliance



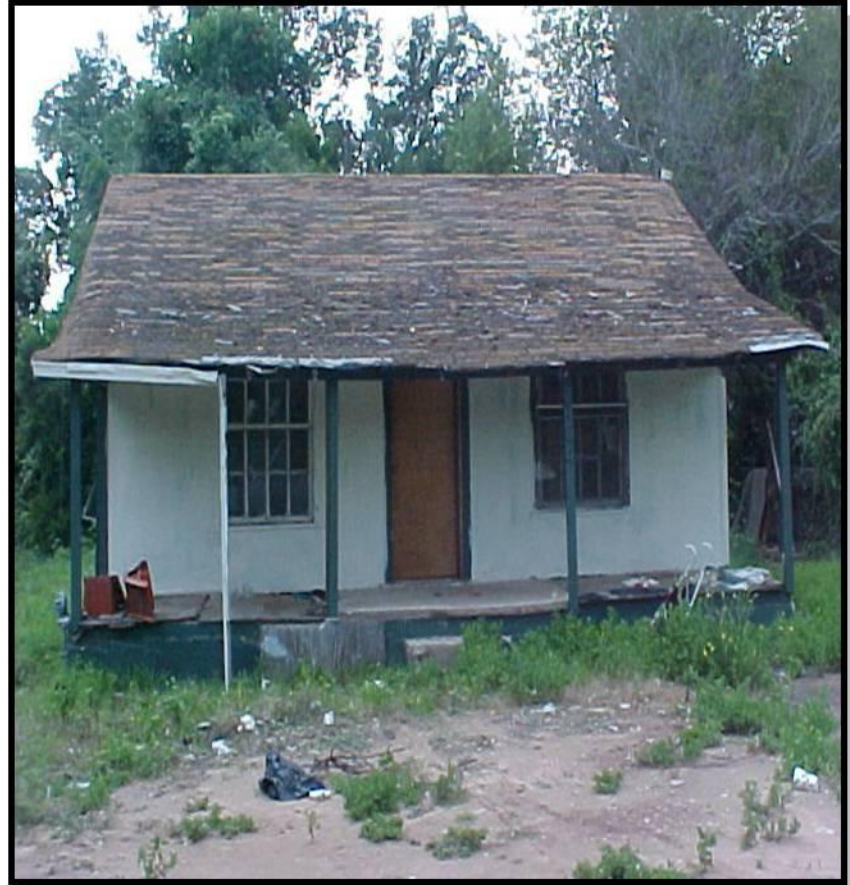
A. Weeds

Visual Displays for Code Compliance



B. Debris

Visual Displays for Code Compliance



C. Dilapidated Buildings

Visual Displays for Code Compliance



C. Dilapidated Buildings (continued)