

## **Applicant Review Panel**

### **Determination of the Most Qualified Applicants for Independent Citizens' Redistricting Commission**

#### **Interpretation of City Charter Article 11 (A)**

May 16, 2013

#### **Background**

On November 16, 2012, City of Austin voters approved a city charter amendment which provides for the election of city council members from 10 geographical single-member districts, beginning with the election in November 2014. The boundaries of the 10 districts will be drawn by an Independent Citizens' Redistricting Commission (ICRC).

Applicants for a position on the ICRC must meet certain requirements, such as being a registered voter in the City of Austin for the previous five years and being free of conflicts of interest. Applicants for the ICRC were required to disclose their voting history (for non-students), current address, voter ID number, and any conflicts of interest. The city auditor reviewed the applications to validate minimum requirements.

The charter amendment also created a 3-member Applicant Review Panel (ARP) to evaluate the applications and select the 60 most qualified applicants based on the following criteria:

1. Relevant analytical skills
2. Ability to be impartial
3. Residency in various parts of the City, and
4. Appreciation for the City of Austin's diverse demographics and geography

On March 11, 2013, the city auditor provided the ARP with 450 applications which met the minimum requirements. The applications included free-form questions so the candidates could describe how they meet the criteria in the city charter. This document describes how the ARP evaluated the applicants to determine the most qualified according to the criteria above.

#### **Relevant Analytical Skills**

Do the applicant's background and/or experience show that they have used analytical skills in the past? This experience could be either in the workforce or in life. Applicants who gave direct examples scored higher in this area than people who gave general descriptions.

An applicant does not rank high in this area by merely saying he or she has analytical skills. There must be an indication in his or her occupational, educational or other history which shows experience in using analytical skills. The experience may be gained by running a business, being in occupations which

require data analysis or having hobbies which involve analytical skills. Applicants who have a background in analyzing census data, identifying groups with common interests or using mapping software have higher rankings in relevant analytical skills.

### **Ability to be Impartial**

Does the application show that the applicant has and can make decisions based solely on information presented? What experience does the applicant have in situations where being impartial is necessary to formulate a qualified decision? Merely saying they are unbiased was not enough to qualify the applicant.

This criterion must also be demonstrated by life experiences, such as working in groups to reach a decision. A dimension of this criterion is having good communication skills, including listening to all sides of an issue. The applicant could point to experiences where he has set aside his personal interest in favor of the group goal, or where he had adhered to pre-determined criteria regardless of personal feelings.

### **Residency in Various Parts of the City**

This criterion was not one of the questions on the application but was determined by the city auditor to be based on the current address of the applicant. The applicant pool was evaluated for residency in various parts of the City as a whole according to current address, and not by individual applicant.

### **Appreciation for the City's Diverse Demographics and Geography**

Almost all the applications expressed a love for Austin and its diversity. However, in choosing the most qualified applicant, the ARP made a distinction between being exposed to diverse cultures, economic groups and ages, and being actively involved in outreach activities which build bridges between the different groups. This outreach can be demonstrated in occupational or volunteer activities within Austin and not in other localities.

Attending multi-cultural events, eating in ethnic restaurants or having friends and family who are in minority groups are positive experiences, but they do not in themselves place the applicant among the most qualified.

The appreciation of geographical diversity required less direct involvement, but was still a part of the evaluation. Applicants who discussed how the diverse geography of Austin affects politics and city services received higher rankings.

Applicants who have been part of a group to learn more about Austin, such as Leadership Austin and CityWorks, received higher rankings.

Does the applicant show an understanding that the different areas of the city have not only different cultures, but different needs of the city council? That these areas can have a different focus of what is important in their lives? That in drawing the lines taking the geographic and demographic differences into consideration is more than using highway divisions.

### **Overall Consideration**

In reviewing the application overall; does the applicant demonstrate the commitment level to the project that the project will require? Does the applicant show a strong desire to be a part of this process? This is a large commitment for applicant to make. They need to show a strong desire and willingness to not only take all information into consideration but to make the long term commitment to see the project through to completion.

### **Process**

The ARP developed an evaluation process in order to cull the set of 450 applications down to 60. The process consisted of three rounds of review and elimination. These rounds are described below.

#### Description of the Rounds

The process was divided in three rounds. In the first round, panel members reviewed all of the applications and scored each application with an overall ranking, one, two, or three. These rankings were shared during public meetings and applications that received all 3s were identified to continue on.

In round two, applications that received one score of a two and the rest were threes were reviewed by the panel member that ranked a two and identified which of those applications were most qualified. The most qualified of those were re-scored with a three.

In round three, the panel each reviewed all of the applications that received all threes, included the ones that were re-scored in round two and each identified applicants that would be removed.

After the pool was decreased to sixty, including two students, the pool's demographics were compared to the demographics of the city to review that the pool had sufficient diversity so that the randomly selected portion of the commission can complete the panel with members that are representative of the demographics of the city.

### **Conclusion**

The first phase of establishing ten geographical council districts in Austin was to select a pool of sixty candidates for the ICRC. With 450 qualifying applications, the ARP was able to set a high bar for meeting or exceeding the criteria. The successful applicants used each question in the application to show how their personal history qualifies them for a position on the ICRC.

## **Recommendations for Future Actions to Implement City Charter Article II (A)**

Members of the ARP have identified improvements to the Applicant Review Panel process that would benefit future panels. These improvement recommendations are listed below.

### **Application for the ICRC:**

1. The application review process would be greatly facilitated by requiring the applicants to disclose their occupations (may be in retired status) and employers for the previous five years. The disclosure of the employers would help the city auditor's office determine if there is a conflict of interest. The disclosure of the occupation would help the ARP determine if the life experience of the applicants involve the analytical skills asserted in the application.
2. The disclosure of race should be check boxes which mirror the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards for the classification of race, combined format. The question of ethnicity is not necessary. The application should not be considered complete unless a box is checked.
3. One of items we recommend would be adding questions regarding why the applicant would like to be on the panel. As I stated this is a big commitment and I think the reasons why someone is willing to make this commitment can affect their ability to do a good job on the commission.

### **Organization of the ARP:**

1. The ARP should elect a chairman with the following powers:
  - Serve as the primary point of contact for all citizen communications and city staff communications in the period between meetings. The chairman shall provide a summary of these activities to the other panel members at an open meeting.
  - Work with city staff to determine agenda items to be posted in accordance with the Texas Open Meetings Act.
  - Ability to delegate duties as necessary.

## **Process**

1. The workload of determining the 60 most qualified applicants to the ICRC should be divided as equitably as possible between meetings. The division of workload may be by County Precinct, applicant number or alphabetically.
2. The due dates for providing evaluations to city staff, for city staff posting meeting materials on the web site, etc., should be made clear and agreed upon by ARP members.

## **Work Product**

1. The ARP should keep in mind they are a sovereign body created by the City Charter and accountable to the voters of Austin. In submitting the list of the most qualified applicants for the ICRC to the City Council, there is no official action of the City Council required or requested. Each individual council member may inform the ARP in writing of one application to strike within five days of the ARP's approval of the list, but the City Council does not act as whole.
2. The ARP has no decision-making duties beyond the action of providing the list of 60 applicants to the City Council. However, they remain responsible for ensuring the correct list of applicants is provided to the City Auditor for the random drawing.