CITY OF AUSTIN

Task Force
on Community Engagement

Report to City Council

May 17, 2016

The Task Force

Member	Appointed by
Margarita Decierdo	Councilmember Houston
Sara Torres	Councilmember Garza
Claudia Herrington *	Councilmember Renteria
Christopher Ledesma	Councilmember Casar
Navvab Taylor	Councilmember Kitchen
Chris Howe	Councilmember Zimmerman
Mike Clark-Madison (Chair)	Councilmember Pool
Ken Rigsbee **	Councilmember Troxclair
Koreena Malone	Mayor Pro-Tem Tovo
Richard Fonté	Councilmember Gallo
Celso Baez III	Mayor Adler
Andrea Hamilton	Mayor Adler
Irfan Syed	Mayor Adler

The Assignment

- Existing City engagement tools and practices
- Innovative techniques used elsewhere
- Fiscal implications
- Specific considerations:
  - Disability accommodations
  - Foreign language access
  - Virtual/online participation
  - District/neighborhood-centered alternatives
  - Public hearing notification process
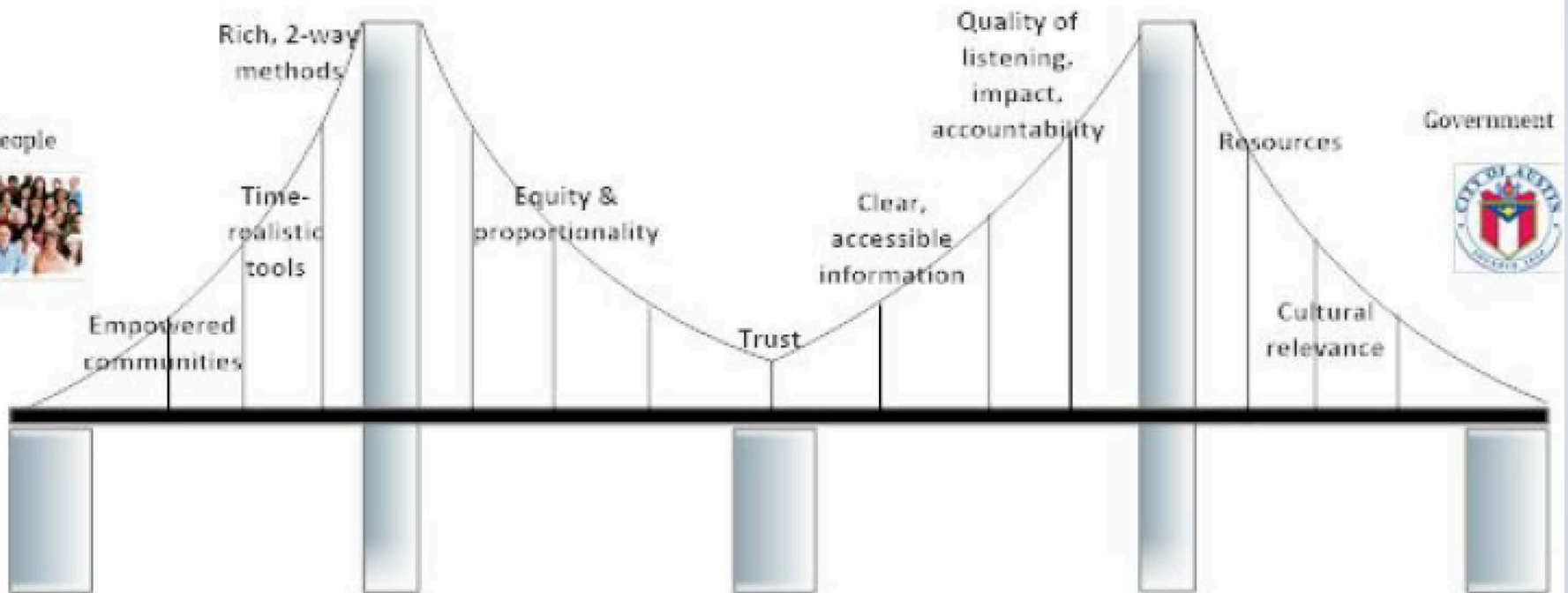
Key Elements of Effective Engagement

Key Elements of Effective Community Engagement

Purpose of quality public engagement

Quality public engagement offers opportunities for ALL voices to be heard and respected, which leads to better representation of the community, which in turn results in better decisions and policies.

Empowered Communities	Time-realistic Tools	Rich 2-way Methods	Equity & Proportionality	Mutual Trust	Clear, accessible information	Quality of Listening, Impact Accountability	Resources	Cultural Relevance
Communities take ownership of their issues and concerns. Empowerment for disenfranchised populations Overcoming your fear of participating Knowing HOW to have influence (what does it take?) Stability, e.g. housing, food, work, etc.	Ability for people to participate even if they have limited time.	Opportunities for dialogue & consultation, not just 1-way communication Willingness to meet in the middle, find common ground Make it easy & welcoming. Culturally relevant methods	Equitable methods AND outcomes Fully representative, not just loudest voices Proportionality, not just those with access Physical access, opportunities to be heard.	Residents have more trust in facts, experts and City government has more trust in feedback from the community.	People know how to have input Full & organized information Easily understood information Transparency Accessible information for those with special needs.	Listen Adequate follow though, promises are kept Explicit commitment about how input will be used Input directly to decision-Makers Clear time table and end point for projects Show the results, impact of the feedback	Staffing Budgets Other resources	Use culturally relevant methods Understand community strengths and weaknesses to understand capacity Help people overcome their fear of giving input

Key Elements of Effective Engagement

Key Elements of Effective Community Engagement

The People

Government

Rich, 2-way methods

Quality of listening, impact, accountability

Resources

Time-realistic tools

Equity & proportionality

Clear, accessible information

Cultural relevance

Empowered communities

Trust

Purpose:
Quality public engagement offers opportunities for all voices to be heard and respected,
which leads to better representation of the community,
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The Timeline

- Biweekly meetings July 2015 - March 2016 (384 in-meeting volunteer hours):
  - Fall 2015: Input and data gathering
    - Workgroups and focus groups
    - Community surveys
    - Testimony before the Task Force
  - Winter 2016: Needs assessment and key themes
    - Based on input
    - Reflecting innovative approaches/best practices
  - Spring 2016: Development of final recommendations

The Working Groups

- Neighbors and neighborhoods
- Businesses (including chambers/trade groups)
- Civic volunteers and nonprofits, including:
  - Environmental community
  - Human/social services
- Underrepresented populations
- Boards and commissions
- City departments

Community Feedback

- Focus groups with community leaders

- Conversation Corps (September 2015)

- Community surveys (General public; Organizational leaders; Boards and commissions; English, Spanish, Asian languages)

- In-depth interviews/feedback from members of the City Council and City engagement specialists

- Testimony before the Task Force

Five Key Themes

1. Make information clear, relevant and easily accessible.

2. Make it easier for people to give input in ways that are convenient, accessible and appropriate for them.

3. Explain how input will be used and show how that input had an impact on the decision made.

Five Key Themes

4. Ensure that everyone who cares about an issue or is impacted has the opportunity to engage.

5. Ensure that City staff have the support, training, tools and resources to do engagement well.

Theme One:
Making information clear

Theme One: Selected Comments

- "Make information accessible to those with special needs."

- "People want information about what is happening in their district or what directly affects them."

- "… [no] online tool that meets everyone's needs and the City's website is not meeting needs.

- "People are not aware of communication and engagement tools."

- "People want multiple channels and the City as a whole needs to provide multiple channels."

- "Being able to filter for information on issues you care about…not a 'fire hose.'"

- "Find ways to maximize the impact of City communication that is put out by our strategic partners, e.g. neighbors and other organizations."

Theme One: Selected Comments

- "A decentralized system results in inconsistency, information being scattered and hard to find, reinventing the wheel each time and no citywide database of people who engage and what they care about."

- "There is a need for localization of information and sources need to be trustworthy."

- "There is an issue with the timeliness, consistency and accuracy of information."

Theme One: Recommendations

1A: Website redesign

1B: Real-time open data portal

1C: Repair, reinvent the Community Registry

1D: More effective accommodations for users with disabilities

1E: "Austin 101" orientation to how city works

1F: Plain-language content policy

1G: Better curation tools for information users

Theme Two:
Easier Ways to Provide Input

Theme Two: Selected Comments

- "…need to train more people so there is more capacity for translation and interpretation."

- "Use culturally relevant methods …multiple language access."

- "District-based outreach plans would help."

- "Create opportunities for participation that don't require people to physically attend meetings and events."

- "…meet people where they are at and with groups they are already involved with."

- "We need to offer a variety of methods and times for people to engage."

- "Choose tools and techniques that fit the norms, languages and history / relationships of diverse communities."

Theme Two: Selected Comments

- "Negative attitudes and there is engagement fatigue."
- "Need to make engagement more fun – unique approaches have worked."
- "Need to find ways for people who want to participate to be put to work."

- "Some would like to see the City use community liaisons to engage them so that they would know who to work with."

Theme Two: Recommendations

2A: District office hours, town halls

2B: Designated accessible meeting spaces

2C: Engage community partners w/expertise

2D: "Engagement Bus" and mobile input kiosks

2E: Simple methods, plain language

2F: Online agenda commenting system

2G: Digital "open city hall" platform

2H: Online/virtual participation at meetings

Theme Three:
Show how the input is used

Theme Three: Selected Comments

- "People want to know in advance how their input will be used so they know [it] matters."

- "There are no structures to make sure that the results of engagement are followed."

- "Create a system that closes the feedback loop, so after you engage you find out what decision was made and why."

- "…follow up communication."

- "There is a lack of responsiveness by the City."

- "Some Boards and Commissions are frustrated because they don't know what happens to their recommendations and there is a lack of clarity about where their input goes."

- "People are not sure what the most effective way is to get information and give input."

Theme Three: Selected Comments

- "…a lack of understanding of the process for how people can engage more effectively…"

- "Some feel the only way to accomplish things is to go directly to the elected officials."

- "People feel they are not being heard. They want a summary of input. They need to know that they were heard as well as what was said by others."

- "The ways Boards and Commissions interact with the public and whether, when and how they get input varies. Some feel that…their role is to provide recommendations, not to gather further input."

- "Need to manage expectations – if what people want is outside the scope of an engagement, we need to tell them that."

Theme Three: Recommendations

3A: Provide timely feedback on how and when
       input is being used.

3B: Use technology more effectively to provide
       feedback (including electronic voting)

3C: Structure all boards and commissions
       to receive public input.

3D: Enforce board and commission bylaws

Theme Four:
Ensure all can be heard

Theme Four: Selected Comments

- "People think only certain people have a voice and that they don't."

- "We need processes to be fair and representative and reflect input of the entire community impacted by a decision, not just a vocal few."

- "We need to focus on greater equity and proportionality."

- "There is a concern that people are appointed to positions of power, such as Boards and Commissions, and they don't necessarily have technical expertise on the issue they are working on."

- "When only hearing from people you have always heard from, then the challenge is knowing what needs are for everyone."

Theme Four: Recommendations

4A: Invest in creating capacity and trust within under-represented communities.

4B: Financially support, expand and strengthen public conversational, dialogue opportunities for input, beyond City Council meetings.

4C: Create a consistent, structured, transparent process from proposal to decision that allows the public to track online the progress and status of items.

Theme Five:
Support and equip staff

Theme Five: Selected Comments

- There's no consistency in how engagement happens across City departments.

- There is no dictate that decision making should include certain kinds of engagement.

- Because of hands off structure and silos, everything is a recommendation… [put the] processes and structures in place that are required.

- "It varies as to how much of a priority the leadership in City departments and at City Hall give to engagement…"

- "…don't have the resources they need to do appropriate engagement strategies."

- "Departments often are trying to work through major engagement efforts but then get pulled off because priorities change."

Theme Five: Selected Comments

- "PIO is overtaxed so they can't fulfill all the needs."

- "They get inconsistent and fragmented direction."

- "Bilingual and culturally appropriate processes are a challenge."

- "Don't have enough physical spaces / places around city to do engagement."

- "There is not enough value placed on building the skills needed to do engagement well – city staff need training."

- "Needs to be organization-wide plan to coordinate efforts, leverage resources and do more than one thing when we are engaging people."

- "Alignment and focus…has to happen at the [executive] level."

Theme Five: Recommendations

5A: Provide ongoing training to city staff.

5B: Executives should promote and encourage best practices and lead by example.

5C: Prioritize that people should BE meaningfully engaged and FEEL meaningfully engaged.

5D.   Develop a database of local grassroots leaders that all staff can access.

5E.   Consistently evaluate representation and satisfaction of engagement efforts.

The Top 10:
Priority Recommendations
of the Task Force

Top 10 Recommendations

1) Implement a website redesign. (1A)

2) Invest in creating capacity and trust with under-represented communities. (4A)

3) Ongoing training to city staff who engage with the public. (5A)

4) Online agenda commenting system for community members to give input to Council, Commissions, Boards, and Task Forces on city issues. (2F)

Top 10 Recommendations

5) Provide feedback from engagement efforts in a timely manner to participants on what was heard and how the input is being used to inform future decisions. (3A)

6) Implement a new online engagement platform. (2G)

7) Publish content in standard machine-readable formats to data portal in real time. (1B)

Top 10 Recommendations

8) Content creation policy to ensure: (1) clear communication in everyday language across all media types; (2) improved clarity of legal notices regarding land use cases; (3) explanatory pieces about complex topics being discussed by the City Council. (1F)

9) Partner with community organizations that have existing relationships, trust and engagement expertise. (2C)

10) Structured, transparent process that allows the public to track online the progress and status of items. (4C)

Community Feedback

- Focus groups with community leaders

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- Testimony before the Task Force

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Thank you.

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communityengagement.bloomfire.com