

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

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

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.

Conclusion

The first phase of establishing 10 geographical council districts in Austin was to select a pool of 60 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)

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 application should not be considered complete unless a box is checked.

Organization of the ARP:

3. 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

4. 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.
5. 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

6. 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.

7. 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.