

## **Report on Budget Recommendations to Council for FY 2022-23 Joint Inclusion Committee**

The Joint Inclusion Committee (JIC) made significant changes to its approach to budget recommendations for FY 2022-23 based on comments and suggestions from the past several years. The changes were intended to reflect the mission of the JIC to better "promote close cooperation between Council City management, City boards, commissions, committees, task forces, individuals, institutions, and agencies to increase and sustain equity, diversity, and inclusion in the City of Austin.

This year, we began the process by preparing a list of the issues that we believed were most pressing for the marginalized communities represented by the commissions that make up the JIC. We intended to focus our recommendations and endorsements on these priority issues without limiting commissions from making individual recommendations on issues specific to their communities. Accordingly, chairs, vice-chairs, and designated JIC representatives from the member Commissions vetted these issues in a virtual meeting. The identified issues included:

- Affordability
- Resilience
- Access
- Engagement
- Public Safety
- Health

The second step was a briefing from the Budget Office on what prior-year recommendations had been included in the current adopted budget, followed by an opportunity to meet with departments to discuss their current year plans. Unfortunately, this briefing did not occur until late January of this year rather than at the beginning of the fiscal year as has been done in past years. This delay put commissions at a considerable disadvantage in preparing informed budget recommendations, given the shortened time frame between the budget briefing and the deadline for submitting recommendations.

The six priority issues served as the basis for organizing our three town hall sessions, which began immediately following the Budget Office briefing. Although the priority issues provided a focus for the town halls, discussions were not limited to those subjects. Overall, the town halls supported the focus on the identified issues but provided additional contexts based on how individuals had experienced the issue. For example, while we had originally defined safe and affordable housing to include the related expense of childcare, we heard from the community that family members with disabilities presented unique unmet needs in terms of access and affordability.

Additional meetings with City departments were scheduled to discuss possible recommendations and get department input. Those were scheduled so that multiple commissions with similar issues could meet with departments simultaneously to better use City

staff time and explore strategies that could work across communities with similar issues, such as the mental health crisis. The meetings were also intended to develop a better working relationship with departments so that progress in resolving issues could be followed throughout the year, providing better information for recommendations in future years.

Within the parameters of the priority issues, member commissions submitted budget recommendations to the JIC for endorsement. Twenty-nine of those recommendations were endorsed and included in this report, organized by the priority issues.

## **Affordability**

This priority issue centered on safe and affordable housing. Commissions have determined that quality-of-life housing must be:

- Safe, both physically (condition of facilities) and mentally (free from harassment, discrimination), and
- Affordable, including the economic influencers that impact the community's ability to afford the housing, such as childcare for younger residents and in-home care for seniors.
- *Critical quality-of-life factor*: housing exists within the context of one's situation; it is not safe if it cannot be freely enjoyed as a home. Furthermore, it is not affordable if other necessities preclude one's ability to pay the cost.

In our town hall meetings, these points were magnified by those who spoke. Some described the perception that the City's affordable housing had not met diversity goals that define equity; others talked of management harassment. Town Hall public participants described the rental ranges based on median family income as unfair, especially for those who fall at the bottom of the income range but are charged rent based on incomes much higher than theirs. Seniors and others on fixed income programs spoke of facing the prospect of losing their housing as rents based on an increasing median family income were unaffordable on their fixed income.

The Joint Inclusion Committee endorsed seven recommendations to Council under this issue:

- Recommendation 20220328-#A-2 from the LGBTQ Quality of Life Commission on Safe and Affordable Housing: This recommendation requests expanded data collection and reporting on applications and tenants of affordable housing receiving City financing. A workgroup has already begun providing requested feedback to the Housing and Planning Department regarding their current communications with the public and efforts to make improvements.
- Recommendation 20220309-04Cvi from the Commission on Seniors on Rent and Utility Assistance: This recommendation is intended to address the problems that seniors (in particular) are having with the rental rates based on Austin's median family income. However, it is also applicable to others impacted by this formula in determining rent.

- Recommendation 20220309-3a from the Early Childhood Council on Maintaining Early Childhood Funding and Recommendation 20220311-002c from the Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities: These recommendations are intended to address the related cost and availability of family services and the importance of these in terms of affordable quality of life.
- Recommendation 20220307-2d2 from the Commission on Immigrant Affairs, Recommendation 20220322-3aii from the Hispanic Quality of Life Commission, and Recommendation 20220328-004c6 from the Asian American Quality of Life Commission on Immigrant Legal Services: All of these recommendations recommend funding for expanded services to address immigrant legal services. The commissions and the community noted that the immigrant community needs access to quality, low-cost legal services to afford things like childcare and housing.

## **Resiliency**

The Joint Inclusion Committee passed Recommendation 20220323-005b, asking that the Council address the Winter Storm Task Force Final Report items that have not already been addressed.

Participants in the forums expressed hope that resilience hubs could be vital community resources and could serve as a center for more effective community engagement. In addition, they stated that they hope these hubs could help tailor City outreach to local communities to ensure those communities can make their needs heard.

We are currently awaiting a report from the Economic Development Department regarding the Colony Park Sustainable Community, so our recommendation regarding that development remains pending.

## **Access**

Our forum on Access and Engagement offered us many ways to view the issue of access. Members of the community brought up difficulty in navigating complex systems, being faced with technical jargon or in a language other than those spoken in the community. A couple of speakers noted that access to interpreters is needed, especially for people who do not speak English or Spanish. Speakers also pointed out that the City should do better with outreach, meeting the communities on their terms, and at times that work for their schedules.

The JIC endorsed five recommendations to Council on this issue:

- Recommendation 20220307-2d1 of the Commission on Immigrant Affairs requests further development of an immigrant affairs office.

- Recommendation 20220307-2d4 of the Commission on Immigrant Affairs requesting summer camps in Spanish or dual language summer camps.
- Recommendation 20220322-003a of the Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Resource Advisory Commission requesting funding for Two-Generation Bilingual Early Childhood Programs.
- Recommendation 20220329-001 of the African American Resource Advisory Commission requesting equitable funding and completion of the George Washington Carver Library Museum and Heritage.
- Recommendation 20220322-003a of the Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Resource Advisory Commission to expand funding for AISD Parent Support Specialists.

## **Engagement**

The issue of Engagement has become especially important over the past two years when communities in Austin faced exceptional hardships in the aftermath of historical weather events coupled with extreme isolation induced by the pandemic. These unprecedented times created circumstances that made the ability to engage the City government more critical than usual and also revealed severe shortcomings of our City's ability to engage with the communities they serve effectively.

In all three of our town hall meetings, speakers referred to problems made more difficult by the issues encountered in requesting services or information from their City government. Comments included "they don't listen to us", "disrespectful", "can't get an answer", "hard to find" and "don't understand government-speak". Most often, the preferred solution was a go-between - a person that residents can talk to that understands their problem and can explain to them what the City has to offer in a way that they can understand. Commission representatives summarized the issue as the need to better communicate with the community.

The JIC endorsed five recommendations to Council on this issue:

- Recommendation 20220309-04Ci from the Commission on Seniors requesting an additional position to support communicating Austin's Age-Friendly Plan to older adults, including outreach activities in senior activity centers with particular attention to reaching elderly persons of color.
- Recommendation 20220309-04Cii from the Commission on Seniors and Recommendation 20220323-005h of the Joint Inclusion Committee (which originated with the African American Resource Advisory Commission and was amended by the JIC). These recommendations emphasized the need for up-to-date community information for all of the commissions represented on the JIC to make better-informed recommendations to the City Council. Some of these commissions have never had a Quality-of-Life Study. All JIC commissions need to have data that City staff regularly updates through community surveys (instead of relying on outside consultants on an ad-hoc basis). The JIC has discussed the importance of exploring options for more cost-

effective data collection methods organized internally rather than exclusively through external consultant contracts.

- Recommendation 20220328-004c2 from the Asian American Quality of Life Commission requests an additional position for the Cultural Arts Division to provide deeper communication with the cultural arts community.
- Recommendation 20220330-002 from the African American Resource Advisory Commission requests that Council ensure that equitable resources and opportunities are available to the African American community to increase their education and earning potential.

## **Public Safety**

In our forum on public safety, community members expressed support for the recommendations of the Reimagining Public Safety report. The discussion was focused on ways to strengthen communities and less on law enforcement. For example, there was a discussion about how there should be more activities in our parks for families because activities in parks are a crime deterrent, and there is a need to provide access to healthy physical activity equitably. There was also a discussion about the need for supporting resilience hubs and investing in community health workers to strengthen our communities. Therefore recommendations in the other areas are related to public safety as well.

The JIC endorsed two recommendations to Council relating directly to public safety:

- Recommendation 20220302-002d from the Commission for Women focuses on funding to assist victims of sexual violence. This includes the continuation of positions previously funded by the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, implementation of the Reimagining Public Safety recommendation related to community emergency financial assistance programs, and other specific recommendations about victims of sexual violence.
- Recommendation 20220330-003 from the African American Resource Advisory Commission requesting funding for the Austin Police Office of Community Liaison.

## **Health**

Health issues for the communities represented by the commission members of the JIC have been focused primarily on two areas over the last few years - mental health and health complications resulting from homelessness. This trend continues, and comments made by public participants during town hall meetings reinforce this dual focus. In addition, there are numerous statistics illustrating the extent of these problems, including information from the LGBTQ Quality of Life Study and survey in which 42% indicated experiencing depression and 12% suicidal ideation, as well as reports outlining the increase during the last two years with the impacts of the pandemic.

There were several discussions between Austin Public Health and commissions about recommendations exploring existing funding and services. However, some difficulties in these talks highlighted a need for more work to understand the big picture of health services, including funding and the results they are achieving.

The JIC endorsed eight recommendations to Council dealing with funding for health services:

- Recommendation 20220309-004Cviii from the Commission on Seniors focused on the health care of older adults experiencing homelessness; Recommendation 20220302-002d from the Commission for Women focused on women experiencing homelessness; Recommendation 20220330-004 from the African American Resource Advisory Commission focused on health care for African Americans experiencing homelessness.
- Recommendation 20220302-02d from the Commission for Women focused on funding mental health care for women in Austin. Recommendation 20220322-02d from the Hispanic Quality of Life Commission focused on funding mental health care for Hispanics/Latinos in Austin. Recommendation 20220328-004c5 from the Asian American Quality of Life Commission focused on funding mental health care for Asian Americans in Austin. Finally, recommendation 20220328-3A-3 from the LGBTQ Quality of Life Commission focused on funding mental health care for LGBTQ people in Austin.
- Recommendation 20220307-2d3 from the Commission on Immigrant Affairs for additional funding for staff increases to support the increase in the number of refugees served by the Refugee Health Screening Clinic.

### **Recommendations Regarding the Budget Process**

Finally, as noted earlier, the process by which Boards and Commissions can participate in the City's annual budget development has not been well defined in the past. The result is that Commissions often have inadequate time to develop informed recommendations, and City departments receive confusing information.

To improve the process going forward, the JIC passed Recommendation 2022323-005g (originally drafted by the LGBTQ Quality of Life Commission) that requests that the City Council consider and include the Board and Commission recommendation process in their annual adoption of a budget schedule. This will ensure an established process that gives adequate time to confer with City staff and make informed recommendations regarding City services.