CITY OF AUSTIN

Enhancing Public Participation at City Council

SpeakUpAustin Discussion Comments

1/27/2015

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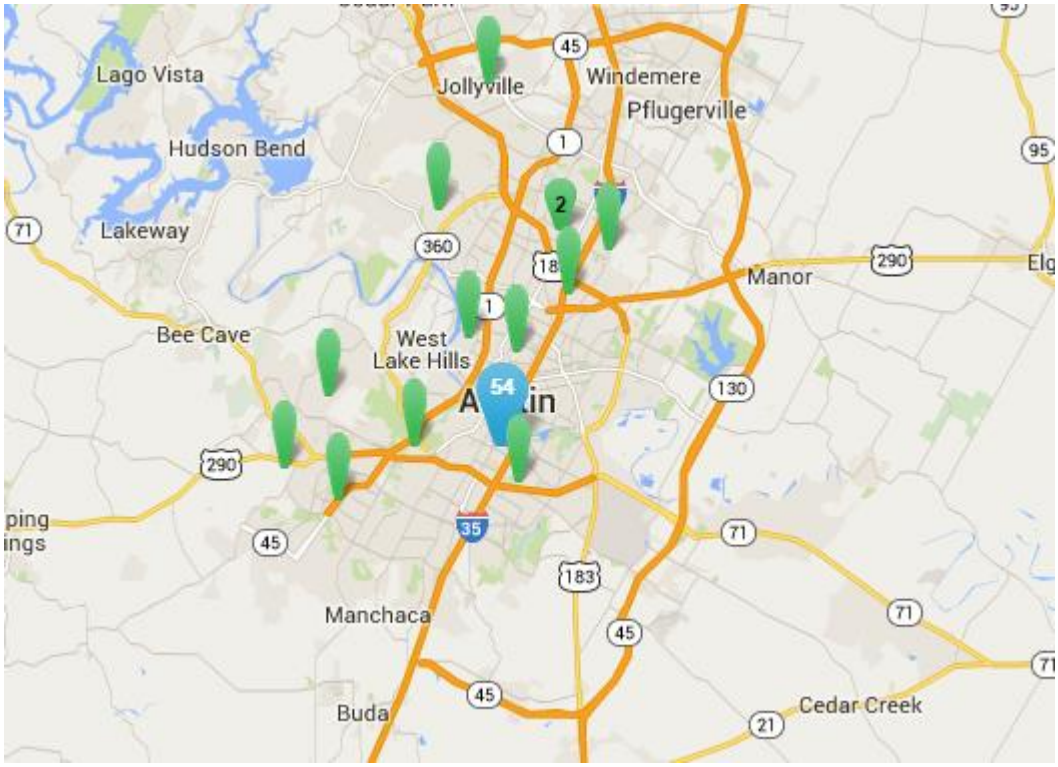
Enhancing Public Participation at City Council Report

Discussion Hosted on SpeakUp Austin
January 9-22, 2015

Participant Summary

PARTICIPANTS	ANSWERS	REPLIES	AGREES
68	217	107	64

Location of Participants



General Feedback Summary and Recommendations

Citizens of Austin seemed to share many common and consistent beliefs about city council changes and increasing public engagement. These common trends include:

- More council member communication
    - More meetings in the specified districts

    - More **direct feedback and responses from council** members when citizens send in commentary and requests.
- More accessibility and transparency
    - With rising technology and capabilities- city documentation and notices should be more **user-friendly.**
    - Citizens consistently expressed desire for an **alert system** to be notified on information about the topics most important to them.
    - Addressing new engagers to municipal government – orientating people to how to get involved with step by step instructions.
    - All topics wanted feedback on how any new structure changes faired at the end of the year.

Topic: First Proposal: Manage Council agenda to avoid late night meetings and foster greater public participation

Proposed strategies include:

- Rotate Council meeting agenda items on a regular schedule by subject to save staff, public and Council time. Example: week 1 and 3 zoning, week 2 and 4 other items
- Hold Council meetings more frequently to reduce the number of agenda items per meeting and to end meetings at a reasonable time.
- Move Executive sessions to a day other than Council meetings as appropriate.

What are your thoughts on these proposals?

Feedback Summary

- <u>More Meetings</u>
    - Generally favored more frequent meetings
        - More **weekend** meetings
        - More varied meeting times and locations
        - Supported separating executive session meetings
    - Criticism regarding more meetings
        - "more meetings does not equal more engagement"
        - More meetings may delay decision process
        - More meetings is only efficient if more people can attend
    - General recommendations and requests
        - Feedback was more focused on an **increase in ways for citizens to be involved** in meeting than just a flat increase in meetings.
        - Requested a list-serv or **notification system** so people can find out which meetings contain items of interest to them, specifically.
        - Meeting agendas should be more **time sensitive** with regards to what issues will be taken up at what times.
- <u>Commentary / Speaking on Issues</u>

- Negative feedback about the “for” or “against” structure of speaking
  - Many “independent” speakers get cut short
  - **Not all opinions from speakers are specifically sided**
- Timing Feedback
  - Favored a time limit for speaking but not strictly ’30 minutes for each side.’
  - Presentations (by entities other than a citizen with comments) should be time limited and posted to the city website
- General Feedback / Speaking Recommendations
  - Favored public input at committee level meetings
    - *Caveat- Items that never went to a committee should not have a limit for the time of public testimony before the Council.*
  - Different forums or outlets for feedback and community engagement
    - **Meetings’ live stream should have an area to give live feedback and commentary**
    - Speaking to specified council members directly – **with consistent responses from council members**
      - Council members to provide open office hours for speaking with constituents (Especially favored to occur within the geographical district location.)
    - Examples:
      - 2 days of Citizen Communication (including afternoon and evening times)

108 Responses

Larry Sunderland at January 09, 2015 at 5:09pm CST

The practical downside of increased participation is the amount of time needed to hear all who wish to speak. Increasing those opportunities to speak will help in that regard. What cannot happen is what became the default action for large controversies in the past council. This was the announcement at council that each "side' had 30 minutes and figure out on your own how to divide that up. Assumption being that there were two sides only and that everyone is aligned in one of those two camps. Individual non aligned citizens are disinfranchised by this practice. Is the public hearing just there to meet the citizen comment requirement or is it there to gather facts and opinions ahead of a decision?

> **Will Will** at January 10, 2015 at 5:11am CST
>
> "individual non aligned citizens are disenfranchised by this practice" That happened to me. Shame on Shelly Lee for having only liberal environmental groups speak on item #10 on 12/11/2014.

Fritz Knopg at January 15, 2015 at 11:11pm CST

Larry, I especially agree with your last bit: "Is the public hearing just there to meet the citizen comment requirement or is it there to gather facts and opinions ahead of a decision?" We should give people TIME to be heard. (Still retaining the right to occasionally – very rarely – stop someone from droning on.)

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:17pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Larry and Will. Do you have a suggestion as to how to improve this practice?

Brad Parsons at January 17, 2015 at 9:18am CST

There is a problem, just 1, I see in all of this. For an item that has not gone to any Committee, Council can still limit public testimony to say 30 minutes each side, and that means people who sign and show up will be cut out of giving testimony on items that they were never given an opportunity at Committees to give feedback on. Prior Council did this often, these proposed changes still leave that bad option available to the new Council, seems like by design, unless it is amended out. **So the Amendment would be that for items that never went to a Committee, there will be no limit on total time of public testimony before the whole Council.** All the more reason why everything possible should first go before a Committee.

Mark Rome Mark Rome at January 09, 2015 at 5:17pm CST

I like all the ideas, and understand what you are proposing. The description reads like something out of a legal and business class, or quality program. Maybe break it down into everyday language? Simplify and be direct

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:18pm CST

Thanks for your comment, Mark; any specific section where you would like clarification? -Moderator

Tim Thomas at January 09, 2015 at 5:27pm CST

I fail to see how this would help. By moving to more nights you make it harder to navigate the system and engage. This will be a boon to the professional complaining class who will be able to complain every night of the week, but make it more confusing to find out what need they need to attend.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:17pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Tim. What would you propose as an alternative to what's been presented here that would help the public engage? -Moderator

Debbie Russell at January 20, 2015 at 5:58pm CST

...and there's the little matter of the TX Open Meetings Act.

Fritz Knopg at January 15, 2015 at 11:15pm CST

I think face-to-face communication is best.

Tim Thomas at January 15, 2015 at 10:11am CST

Fewer meetings. Make each case open on the Internet and collect comments at each step along the way. Then council can read all the comments before voting on it. Allow online voting tied to address on each resolution before city council so they can guage public opinion the day of. It's very simple.

Neither solution is going to ensure that everyone gets everything they want. But my solution involves a lot less wasted time.

Katherine Ray at January 20, 2015 at 5:10pm CST

As to Tim Thomas' suggestion, this sounds great, and it works for me since I have a computer, an iPad, and an iPhone. But what about the people who are less fortunate and don't have easy internet access? I think this solution limits input to the more fortunate in our community, and I don't think that's right or fair.

LaTisha Anderson at January 09, 2015 at 6:06pm CST

My question is what would this times look like is it is to engage more citizens? Will it prevent more or less of the working class not to be be able to attend?

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:18pm CST

Thanks, Latisha--can you clarify your point? Not sure it's clear. -Moderator

LaTisha Anderson at January 14, 2015 at 8:00am CST

Will the flexiability allow for more or less of the working class to attend is basically what I am trying to say.

LaTisha Anderson at January 14, 2015 at 7:58am CST

Here's an example if a meeting starts at 5:00 and will run to about 7 pm. Most working class will still be at work, so will this increase them being able to participate or will times be crafted in such a way that it allows for more people to be apart of the process?

Javier Bonafont at January 09, 2015 at 10:05pm CST

I agree that these are all good starting points. I also think that the idea of having public comment at the committee level is a more useful point in time to engage the public.

Coapublic Information admin **at January 13, 2015 at 3:19pm CST**

Thanks for your comments, Javier. -Moderator

Will Will **at January 10, 2015 at 5:06am CST**

Instead of 3 minutes give 5 minutes, and make sure EVERYONE WHO IS SIGNED UP TO SPEAK, SPEAKS, REGARDLESS OF POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS! I was discriminated against by Shelly Lee Leffingwell on 12/11/2014 item #10 THE ONLY CONSERVATIVE SPEAKER IN FAVOR OF COAL!!!

Coapublic Information admin **at January 13, 2015 at 3:19pm CST**

Thanks for your suggestion, Will.

Will Will **at January 10, 2015 at 5:08am CST**

Oh and the citizens communication thing, do what San Antonio does have it both on Wednesday and Thursday. They have A Session and B Session, A session at 6:00 pm and let B session be the noontime hour for folks that have errands to run in the AM or who travel back and forth.

Coapublic Information admin **at January 13, 2015 at 3:19pm CST**

Thanks for that suggestion, Will. -Moderator

Debbie Russell **at January 20, 2015 at 6:00pm CST**

Such a suggestion might help the concern raised by LaTisha Anderson above.

Katherine Ray **at January 20, 2015 at 5:16pm CST**

comment...What you have suggested, and what is done in San Antonio, is fine for people like me who have flexible schedules. However, with Austin's traffic, if someone works until 5:00 p.m. in either north or south Austin, there is no way they can get downtown, get parked, and get into the City Council Chambers by 6:00 p.m., and noon is totally out of the question. I would love to see us make city government open to more people--not just the wealthy and the chronic complainers. To do that, perhaps if some of these committee meetings (or most or all of the committee meetings) are held somewhere other than downtown, that might really help to bring more people into the process and make the "outsiders" really feel a part of the city.

Roger Chan **at January 10, 2015 at 9:00am CST**

In a City Manager form of government the CMO is full time but the Mayor and council is part-time, we should move some if not all of Council meetings to the weekend to enable more business owners and folks who work during the work week to attend. Public comment should

have to be submitted in advance and screened for repetition and then posted on the city's website for public review and comment. Only the subject/issue and tally of postings need to be reported at council sessions with the exception of burning issues which would be aired in public.

> **Coapublic Information** admin **at January 13, 2015 at 3:21pm CST**
>
> Thanks for your suggestions, Roger. -Moderator
>
> **Debbie Russell** **at January 20, 2015 at 6:03pm CST**
>
> Roger, you had me right up til "have to be submitted in advanced" and "screened." (and I don't think anyone's under the assumption anymore Cmbr is a part-time job...they get full time pay!)

Brad Parsons **at January 10, 2015 at 11:20am CST**

I commend the new Council members and Mayor for wanting to meet more often. With this proposal, you will be meeting at least twice as often as the last Council just with full Council meetings. Throw in the Committee meetings, and you all will be meeting maybe four times as often and possibly more. This will become a FULL TIME job for all of you whereas previous Council's have treated it like a PART TIME job. One point, the Committees will only work if you put a lot of thought and effort into them, preparation, during, and followup, and listen to and incorporate the better points of the public's testimony. Also, Committees should not just pass out of Committee items not ready to go to the full Council. A Committee may have to deal with a proposed item a couple or more times before it is ready to go to the full Council. Good stead with all of this; as an original 10-1 petitioner and watchdog, it is good to see a new Council so eager to double and quadruple the effort of prior Council's toward good and sound policy.

> **Coapublic Information** admin **at January 13, 2015 at 3:20pm CST**
>
> Thanks for your thoughts, Brad; are you suggesting that this would make for too much work for the new Council, or do you think it is an appropriate amount? -Moderator
>
> **Brad Parsons** **at January 13, 2015 at 4:31pm CST**
>
> This is a lot more meetings for the new Council, but if it is what a majority of them want to do, then more power to them. I am figuring at least 1 Council meeting every week or two, 1 or 2 Working Sessions every couple of weeks, and for the 13 Committees every Council member would need to be on at least 4 or 5 Committees. Each Committee would need to meet at least twice a month with some of them needing to meet maybe 3 or 4 times a month. For this to all work, the Committees would need to do their homework, come prepared, and do a lot of work in Committee before passing on to the Council. So that is as many as 2 + 4 + 8 = 14 meetings a month for a Council member,

compared to the prior of about 4 or 5 meetings a month. Much more work, but if the members are up to it, it could be good.

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 2:46pm CST

Topic of Mayor/Council Member workload: Their salaries ($82K+/$70K+) are above the median income of Austinites working full time. I have no issue with these individuals responsibilities becoming a full-time job. Salaried (not hourly) employees all over the city are expected to work full time hours for their pay.

Pat Houston at January 10, 2015 at 1:19pm CST

I agree with Roger Chan's post ... some meetings on weekends, and public comment submitted in advance and posted online.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:22pm CST

Thanks, Pat. -Moderator

Megan Meisenbach at January 22, 2015 at 3:20pm CST

I commend the Mayor and Council on trying new approaches. I would encourage additional Council Meetings with Executive sessions as the last item. Citizens should talk to the full Council.

Here are some streamlining suggestions: City staff's initial input at Council Meetings should have restricted time limits (but be posted in the agenda backup materials) ,long presentations (by entities other than a citizen with comments) be strictly limited, instead posted on the city web site, Council Members comments on why they will vote a certain way should be time limited, Planning Commission agendas be posted 5 business days in advance of meetings.

john hafernik at January 10, 2015 at 3:11pm CST

leave as is, only way to talk to a full council and get your point over to your district rep

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:21pm CST

Thanks, John; to clarify, are you saying no changes should be made to City Council meetings and procedures? -Moderator

Fritz Knopg at January 15, 2015 at 11:19pm CST

I agree, the option of presenting one's views to the full council should be preserved.

john hafernik at January 13, 2015 at 3:37pm CST

that is correct. no changes. every time i have written or e-mailed a mayor or council no response. to be able to appear before a full council and state your case is vauable time for your cause. the new council is just wanting to forgo the face to face time with the citzens.

Anonymous Anonymous at January 10, 2015 at 4:33pm CST

I think they should leave it the way it is, or change it minimally to where public comment is accepted during the committees.

I don't like the idea of public comments having to be screened in advance. So that means some comments wouldn't pass muster? It seems counter to the idea of taking public comments int he first place.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:23pm CST

Thanks for your thoughts. -Moderator

Susan Pantell at January 12, 2015 at 3:00pm CST

I agree with the three bullet point recommendations above. Do not agree with screening comments and only providing some. Maybe times could be varied to allow more people to participate; holding all meetings on the weekends is not a good idea. Maybe it would be possible to hold meetings in different parts of town, since it is difficult for some people to get to City Hall. I did not realize Council members work only part-time; seems like they should be working full-time since there is a lot of work to do and they are paid enough for full-time.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:23pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Susan. -Moderator

Shari Farrell at January 12, 2015 at 4:07pm CST

Many topics are going to require long sessions. Although it would be great to follow a schedule that allows the majority of the population to physically attend (basically after working hours but before sleeping hours) - it does not sound feasible and will cause a backup of items waiting to get on the agenda.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:39pm CST

Thanks, Shari; what would you suggest be done to address that issue? -Moderator

M Castro at January 13, 2015 at 8:38am CST

I like the idea of having zoning on a separate day from other issues. Also like more meetings so they don't end so late.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:39pm CST

Thanks for your comments. -Moderator

will houston at January 13, 2015 at 10:39am CST

It is nearly impossible to understand why an agenda (time and topic) cannot be made and used in order for those who are there can predict when their topic will come up. I have sat through an entire meeting....2pm or so until late that night only to be told the item would be taken up at the next meeting. Then I waited a couple of hours before it was brought up the following week. This is only an exercise in common courtesy.....or arrogance....you chose.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:44pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Will. -Moderator

Debbie Russell at January 20, 2015 at 6:07pm CST

Will, that was more about the mayor changing things around on the agenda to dissuade input on items he was hoping to not have to hear so much input on. "Oh, we really need to go with this item first so staffer so-and-so can go home...so we'll move this up" meanwhile a bunch of tired folks who DON'T get paid to be there are falling asleep waiting for their item.

Delwin Goss at January 13, 2015 at 3:36pm CST

How can you set a time when you don't know how many people are going to speak on an item? If you set a time you have to limit input then thoise who's jobs or lack there of will be hte only ones able to sign up first to speak?

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 11:00am CST

I appreciate the effort, but so far am not tracking how more meetings = more engagement. There's already a well-established group of citizens who have flexible schedules and an opinion on everything under the sun. They'll show up no matter what the final schedule is. My concern is the people who may not have even been to City Hall before that we are trying to engage. How will ordinary mortals know where find out the issues on a particular agenda, or the 3 minute rule, or the difference between first and second reading? Perhaps a short, playful "orientation video" for citizens would be in order: park here, here's the elevator, get your parking validated, here's a map of the group floor, sign up to speak here, and so on.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:44pm CST

Interesting suggestion, Jennifer. Have you seen such a video anywhere else that you could share? -Moderator

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 4:50pm CST

I wish! But no. My advocacy group and another with shared interests got as far as an outline last year for a joint project, but resources were too tight to complete it.

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 11:02am CST

*ground floor

Sharon Yarbrough at January 13, 2015 at 12:53pm CST

As Austin grows, I think that more council meetings are necessary. I also feel a reasonable person who is passionate about an issue can and should learn how to be succinct in their points. If they are able to raise issues where the council needs additional information then council can delay a vote until the additional information is received.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:44pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Sharon. -Moderator

Annette Naish at January 13, 2015 at 1:23pm CST

I think each of these ideas appear to be well thought out and appropriate for what both the council and the public need. The premise of committee meetings in which people with ideas and opinions may speak up is important. But, only if the meetings are at times when the public actually has a chance to be there. I understand that staff members have knowledge and opinions but I believe ignoring the fact that members of the public may also have knowledge and opinions is inapprorpriate. If we are going to move to a city government that is fully inclusive then there must be respect shown to everyone, even people with whom we disagree. In the real world there is not necessarily only one perfect answer.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:46pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Annette--at what times should the committee meetings be held? -Moderator

Annette Naish at January 13, 2015 at 4:01pm CST

I have seen some suggestions that some things happen on weekends. Not sure that is best, but I know you are excluding people with jobs if you have everything happen between 8 and 5 on weekdays. If the committees would be on different topics, it seems that maybe different evenings for different topics? Austin is a city and surely someone can come up with times that work for everyone.

Delwin Goss at January 13, 2015 at 3:49pm CST

I'm not sure I have an answer? I do know setting in Council Chambers for 12 hours just to speak for three minutes only favors certain groups. Those members of the public who have lives/jobs/kids aren't always able to do that. Under the old system Council gets input from paid lobbyists , those who can afford to miss work, those who have jobs with very flexible schedules and from the unemployed. That method excludes a lot of folks. I hate having to quote Spiro Agnew but then the City ends up with something Mr Agnew referred to as the "silent majority". Any elected official who listens only to the 200 people in council chambers and fails to take into account the opinions of the other 800,000 citizens isn't going to fair well

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:49pm CST
>
> Thanks for the comments, Delwin; what do you suggest as an alternative approach? -Moderator

D Sitko at January 13, 2015 at 6:13pm CST

I agree with rotating agenda topics and with scheduling executive sessions to not coincide with council meetings. Increasing the number of council meetings should be a last resort. The US Federal Government deals with public comment on regulatory matters and a host of other initiatives. I was particularly impressed by how the objective setting was conducted for Healthy People 2020. Here is a link to an archived web page that demonstrates how comments were accepted (written, electronic in advance or during web meetings or hard copy) as well as oral (at live meetings and in web meetings). Speakers could sign up ahead of time and on the day-of, space permitting. Time constraints on oral comments were set, which should be true with Austin's council. Accepting written comments in advance and using technology to culminate, sort and tally should be performed. http://198.102.218.64/2010/hp2020/Objectives/Process.aspx

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 14, 2015 at 8:52am CST
>
> Thanks for that input, D. -Moderator

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 3:04pm CST

Council Meetings: The meeting process itself needs to be improved. Having attended/watched many, I would suggest the use of a meeting facilitator. This person, unlike a meeting leader, is focused on the meeting process (agenda, time, participation, etc) versus the content. They generally don't participate in the discussion, but improve the meeting effectiveness. There's lots of info on the web about this process. There may even be CoA employees trained as facilitators.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:42pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 3:06pm CST

Think the idea of having weekly meetings with assigned topics has possibilities as long as provisions are made for items that will cross multiple topics.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:44pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback--what would you consider to be an "overloaded agenda?"

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 3:17pm CST

Executive sessions should be separated from regular agenda in some manner. Either beginning, end, or separate meeting altogether.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:44pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Ken Rigsbee at January 14, 2015 at 4:08pm CST

I agree with Roger Chan and others. However, with our new organization, seems to me that a lot of enhanced communication can be made with an individual's council member directly. I think there ought to be a steadfast limit on time for public comments during a meeting. There are all kinds of other methods and procedures where one might give their opinions. Council Members should have and post office hours for communication with constituents.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:44pm CST
>
> Thanks, Ken--what time limit for public comments would you recommend? -Moderator

Charlie Dismore at January 14, 2015 at 4:36pm CST

I concur with the proposed strategies, recognizing that there will be an increase in meetings required by council members in order to get their jobs done properly. We hope they will be willing to do the time to achieve our expectations. That said, many of us favored the 10-1 format for council so that our voices will be heard loud and clear through our "voice" in the council chamber, namely, our geographical representative. We will be communicating in the main through her for issues we deem important and want to be heard.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:44pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Jim Wilson at January 14, 2015 at 8:55pm CST

Appreciate ability to be more involved. I intend to communicate directly with my district representative to express my thoughts and positions. To that end I would need to be electronically informed of ongoing topics the council is considering so that I can voice my opinion.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:45pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback--how would you prefer to be electronically informed? -Moderator

Rick Rick at January 15, 2015 at 1:26pm CST

I agree with Delwin Goss. This is going to sound strange, but I think that the past City Council has received TOO MUCH comment from the public. You are elected people to represent the citizens and it would be much better if you would make decisions based on your own understanding of the issues. Sure you need SOME input, but honestly, you are ever going to to get ALL of the input that would be needed to be entirely informed. The Special Interest Groups and the lawyers have always controlled the message and the outcome. Of course, I'm hoping that you all can rise above it, but more meetings is not going to help.

I suggest taking it ALL to the internet and allowing people to post, similar to hear on Speak Up, about certain items. Most of us in Austin live too far away from City Hall for us to drive all the way downtown, through horrendous traffic, to finally arrive, and sit and wait hours, to be listened to for 3 minutes. Why not have a 250 word limit and take everything over the internet? Really, why not? Saves on gas, frustration, anyone can comment, etc. The Special Interest Groups are going to hate it because they are accustom to stacking the deck but when the entire City can actually comment from their home, you guys are going to see how warped the input has been over the past 30 years. Viva 10-1!

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:44pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Craig Bennett at January 15, 2015 at 4:27pm CST

Assuming you mean executive session the way I think you do, there is no way to hold executive sessions apart from a city council meeting, as the Texas Open Meetings Act requires that all closed meetings start out in a posted open meeting. Texas Gov't Code 551.101. But, if you mean it differently, then disregard my comment!

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:46pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Doug Matthews at January 16, 2015 at 7:08pm CST

Yes, the council wants to "improve" citizen input and simultaneously to shorten the absurd meeting times: two mutually exclusive goals. To provide "input" does not require a personal performance before the council. Those who clamor to speak from the podium do so largely as a part of political theater. Require "input" to be in the form of e-mail or standard letter to all

members. That satisfies the "input" issue. Everyone get input. Everyone is treated equally and equitably. Not everyone can get up and preach; there is no time for that, and it's inherently unequal and inequitable. Input, letter or e-mail can be posted on the council issue website page. Yes, this will take all the drama out of the sessions, but that's exactly what some folks want.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:50pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Jim Grosso at January 16, 2015 at 8:25pm CST

I think this is an excellent suggestion. The function of the council is to make policy,not micro manage. Austin is now a big city with more complicated problems then in had in oh say 1967. Being a council member is now a full time job.Council members are part of a mini-legislature,not spokespeople for Hyde Part,Tarrytown.SOS,the Serria Club,you get the idea.

> **Doug Matthews** at January 16, 2015 at 10:18pm CST
>
> Thank you, Jim Grosso.
>
> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:50pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Horacio Gasquet at January 16, 2015 at 11:05pm CST

The proposal looks good. I like the idea of having committees so that people can meet on a topic specific agenda. How much it will improve participation is debatable in a busy society. But making it easier to participate should be the first focus. I participated a lot in the past, but got jaded when it seemed that it was too hard to influence the outcome of decisions that were being influenced elsewhere.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:52pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Nada Lulic at January 17, 2015 at 9:52am CST

This is a pragmatic proposal that should start simplifying meeting processes so all participants can be more efficient in deliberation (Council) and participation (citizens). Like many who have commented above, I have long been concerned that a small, vocal, group of people with very flexible schedules have driven many important conversations at Council. I see this proposal as a good start to addressing this concern.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:52pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

pinaki Ghosh at January 17, 2015 at 10:58pm CST

A big challenge of this proposal (or as it has been in the past with the agenda) is that all points are getting equal weightage - like we have defined terror levels or security levels similarly the topics can have color levels (example: red means 30 min allocated for public + 30 for council members etc or green may mean something which can take multiple meetings with 30 minute in each meeting). When putting a topic in the agenda the council members or committee should put in the color coded weightage the topics can be much better managed.

The second challenge is the time allocation for each committee - there are 13 proposed committees - one of them can easily take away most of the time - so council members should allocate a certain amount of mandatory time for each committee each month - which if not used will end the meetings early - this will actually make the committees more efficient.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:51pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback, Pinaki; what would you propose for that allocation of time for each committee each month? -Moderator

Vivian Martin at January 18, 2015 at 7:21pm CST

I'm in favor of this proposal. It allows three avenues for citizens to provide input. It also enables city council to make decision while still fresh and alert. And having committees enable research of issues and ideas so that city council are able to make informed decisions.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:53pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Therese Baer at January 20, 2015 at 9:02am CST

I vote "Yes" on this proposal. Let's try it, as is. it if doesn't work well, then let's modify it.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:54pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

christy bryant at January 20, 2015 at 1:41pm CST

I am in favor of this proposal. It is absurd that our City officials vote on things so late at night. It is common sense NOT to make decisions when you are sleep deprived. Anything to shorten the meetings is a good and healthy thing for the City of Austin. However, I would caution that rules be adopted so Committee meetings don't run past a reasonable time (9:00 pm).

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 2:53pm CST
>
> Thanks for your feedback. -Moderator

Derrius Sims at January 20, 2015 at 5:41pm CST

Allowing citizens to live stream these meetings would do wonders for those who can't fit them into their schedule. It would also encourage younger citizens, whom often feel alienated because they lack the political capital of those more experienced with the process found at the meetings, to participate in the political process. If the live streaming included comments or chat they could even "participate" by having a small section at the end dedicated to answering the highest voted questions or comments. This is the format that large corporations such as Sony and Microsoft use to engage their audiences that would otherwise be unable to participate by physically traveling to their trade shows and doesn't add much work to the process. Chat logs means keeping records is no problem. Twitch tv would be an excellent platform to achieve this functionality at low cost and minimal overhead.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 21, 2015 at 3:01pm CST
>
> Hi, Derrius--we do have live streaming of City Council meetings currently (www.atxn.tv), but am I correct that you would want to add a chat function?

Betsy Greenberg at January 21, 2015 at 9:20pm CST

I think it's great that the Mayor and Council members want to improve opportunities for public engagement. We have always been able to e-mail or phone Council members prior to a public hearing. However, without any responses, there was always the question of whether Council members even read those e-mails. While every decision can't please everyone, it would be nice to at least know that e-mails were received and considered.

One important thing is to avoid the input processes run by staff -- those with posters, maps, online surveys, and projects in a box such as those used for Project Connect and CodeNext. These take a great deal of time and then we have no idea of how (or whether) the public input is used.

Committees seem like a good idea, especially now that the Council is larger. The only concern I have is that for cases that affect a particular district -- such as zoning cases -- the specific district representative should be involved.

Thanks!

More frequent meetings with shorter agendas will be much better.

Susana Almanza at January 22, 2015 at 11:12am CST

We, PODER, agrees with rotating council meetings so that zoning cases/landuse issues are set for specific dates. Zoning cases were at once started at 4 pm which made it easier for some working class people to participate in the zoning cases. Zoning cases should start at a later

time, we suggest 5:30 pm. We agree that Executive Sessions should be moved to Council Work Session days. The Mayor should not limit the amount of speakers. We have participated in numerous topics, only to be left out because the two camps already had their designated speakers and those within an independent camp were excluded for speaking (civic engagement).

Sumit DasGupta, Retired Senior Vice President of Engineering, Silicon Integration Initiative, Inc. at January 22, 2015 at 11:26am CST

Excellent idea in principle,... however, I fear that the proposed structure would delay decision-making unless, there are rules on prioritization and time limits (with sufficient time allotted for deliberations, of course) to ensure ideas don't die in committees. Also, would like to repeat an idea already suggested that some council meetings, depending on public / business interest on an agenda item, be moved to weekends.

Heidi Gerbracht at January 22, 2015 at 11:57am CST

On behalf of RECA, we are supportive of all three of the proposed solutions in this topic. Rotating meetings by subject, meeting more often, and moving exec session to another day all sound like good ways to avoid the late nights that have been so problematic. We'd also suggest that this be an iterative process, so that Council, staff and the public can try it, see what works, and then tweak as needed. Thank you to the new Council for their efforts on this difficult subject.

Mike Dahmus at January 22, 2015 at 1:05pm CST

1. Provide ways for citizens to provide input, viewable by the public, to city council members outside of meetings. The important thing is not that it be provided in a city council meeting itself, but that city council (and staff) see it; that others (media) see it; and that it is persistent.
2. Provide time-sure opportunities to speak. (My one venture before City Council was a disaster - took all day off work and family obligations; got 15 minutes donated to me; spent half the day down there and was ready to go, and then got collapsed into 30 seconds due to the "30 minutes for each side" rule).

Carol Lee at January 22, 2015 at 4:26pm CST

I think all three of these suggestions--rotating meeting focus by like subjects, more frequent meetings, and moving Executive Session to another day---are excellent proposals. Just moving Exec Session to another day would free up a significant chunk of time for the regular meeting without reducing public involvement.

Brett Merfish at January 22, 2015 at 6:40pm CST

On behalf of Workers Defense Project, we support measures to engage the public more effectively. Should the three proposed solutions (rotating meetings by subject, meeting more often, and moving executive session to another day) do avoid long meetings that prohibit meaningful public engagement, then we support them; however, it is imperative that meetings fall during hours when working Austinites can provide input. In addition, we would like these measures to be evaluated as they are implemented to ensure they do indeed allow increased public input and engagement.

Topic: Second Proposal: Enhance opportunity for meaningful public engagement earlier, before decisions are final

Proposed strategies include:

- Move public hearings earlier in the process to Council Committees. At request of 4 Council members, schedule additional public hearing before Council for a limited time period with the goal of establishing a time certain for testimony that is accessible to the public.
- Assign all proposed ordinances/resolutions to Council Committees before being considered by the Council. (Does not apply to time sensitive items or items already further along in the process. This does not change the City Manager's ability to bring items directly to Council.)

What are your thoughts on these proposals?

Feedback Summary

- Committee Meetings
    - In favor of having public input during early processes
        - Must have accessible times for public testimony
    - **Main criticism- committees only having 4 council members**
        - Questions of concern-
            - Only 4 council members present may mean only 4 districts' opinions will be represented
            - Only 4 council members look at the issue in-depth even though all vote
            - Committee breakdown leaves out issues that affect each other
                - Ex- Land use and transportation
        - **Bigger and broader issues should have more council members**
            - Ex- Austin Energy
        - Transparency issues- will all committee meetings be filmed and accessible?
- Methods of Engagement
    - **Online posting outlets and forums were highly preferred over in-person engagement**
        - Preference to the format of Speak Up Austin

- Want more ways to vote on comments
- **Want council to see comments and provide feedback / analysis**

▪ *Caveat- All methods of input in the various processes should be equally weighed*

- Localization of meetings
  - Live 2 way streaming at public library branches for more inclusion
  - More **small scale town hall meetings in each district** with the mayor and council member of the district
- Direct Mayor and Council member communication
  - Email communication **lacks response and input**
  - Recommend a 24hour or 2 business day turnaround time on response

55 Responses

Tim Thomas at January 09, 2015 at 5:29pm CST

I don't feel the problem is a lack of in person public input. In a representative democracy some people are not going to get their way, and that does not mean their opinons were not considered.

I would prefer to have input sessions that were easy to register and vote remotely as well as in person. Webcasts of meetings, etc. I would prefer a system where opinions could be tallied with comments online, to prevent the need to go and shout in person to have your voice heard.

Allowing by right development and simplifying the permitting process would of course also provide less need for these long drawn out public engagement processes.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:47pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Tim; have you seen any examples elsewhere that would be helpful to review? -Moderator

Rollie Cole at January 16, 2015 at 9:51pm CST

Actually, this very process is a great model. Break an issue down into topics, allow for comments that others can see (which also lets the commenter know the comment was received), respond to those comments. SpeakUpAustin is a great model for that. -- What is lacking here (sometimes shows up on other Austin-related projects) is some organized way to "vote" on comments and some final analysis, shown to the commenters, that will be the summary to pass on to the council. The analysis should have numeric totals, pie and bar charts, etc. that describes the comments, the number of people commenting and supporting various comments, etc. So SpeakUpAustin is a great start -- adding "polling" and "re-presented analysis" would be great next steps.

Brad Parsons at January 17, 2015 at 9:18am CST

There is a problem, just 1, I see in all of this. For an item that has not gone to any Committee, Council can still limit public testimony to say 30 minutes each side, and that means people who sign and show up will be cut out of giving testimony on items that they were never given an opportunity at Committees to give feedback on. Prior Council did this often, these proposed changes still leave that bad option available to the new Council, seems like by design, unless it is amended out. **So the Amendment would be that for items that never went to a Committee, there will be no limit on total time of public testimony before the whole Council.** All the more reason why everything possible should first go before a Committee.

Javier Bonafont at January 09, 2015 at 10:17pm CST

I think input at the committee level is a terrific idea. By the time something is at the full council a lot of work has gone into it, and a lot of discussion and staff input and its a big freight train, so having the public weigh in early, in smaller committee hearings, is far more likely to produce results. I ALSO believe that some online format (such as this) to gauge opinion, or some Live 2-way streaming to branch libraries would make things more inclusive. Finally, I get DOZENS of "notices" from the city about zoning and planning and items up for votes, but none of these notices contain any USEFUL information. Its all vague abstracts like "the council will consider a proposal to alter the sign ordinance." WHAT does that mean? Alter to what? To make signs larger? smaller? voluntary? taller? Certainly there is a specific proposal to be discussed, why not actually include it? Its like that with almost everything. "Will consider a site plan waiver at 1000 B Street" What? what KIND of waiver? what is being built? It seems like whoever creates the notices deliberately conceals any useful details, so my choice is to ignore most of them or spend hours digging for details and calling and going online. I don't know why the staff bothers with notices at all (okay, i do know, its in the charter, they are forced to, and it clearly shows that they don't want to.) Improve that.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:47pm CST

Thanks, Javier--how would you improve the notices you mentioned? -Moderator

Roger Chan at January 10, 2015 at 9:06am CST

We need to institute and conduct town hall meetings in each district. Minimally the mayor and that district council member must be present to discuss and explore issues

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:48pm CST

Thanks for your suggestion, Roger. -Moderator

Scott Trimble at January 20, 2015 at 2:25pm CST

I was going to suggest this as well. Each council member should conduct regular town halls in their districts. I recommend 2-4 meetings per month, on different days (and at different times?) so it's not always the same people participating.

Karen T at January 20, 2015 at 5:44pm CST

I agree. We have a traffic problem. We also now have 10 districts. Let's bring our individual representatives to us rather than all of us having to go to City Hall. And set up real time access so we can stay in our homes and comment.

Brad Parsons at January 10, 2015 at 11:37am CST

Am a little concerned about the wording above with regard to limiting total time for testimony before the whole Council. For Items that have come straight to Council and not gone through the proposed Committees, it is not appropriate to limit hearing time other than the 3 minutes per individual, also individuals should still be able to sign up and donate their time to another speaker when any testimony is taken before the whole Council or Committee. One of the worse examples of this in the past year was when CM Martinez motioned and the Council accepted limiting public testimony to only 30 minutes on each side on the Rail issue the first and only time the final proposal was heard before Council. THAT WAS TOTALLY INAPPROPRIATE, and a part of why the voters rejected Rail on the ballot, a perfect example of not enough genuine public input on an issue, in that case the Rail ballot item.

I am a little concerned that the new Mayor and Council might be missing the point of the problem of the past includes bad information and regularly false assumptions from The Staff gaming the system. Staff still has the advantage to game this system. Even with these proposed reforms, the problem is not the public giving testimony. The best solutions still will require a skeptical and discerning Council that does not accept false assumptions, limited solutions, bad and biased legal advice, and pigeonholed policy choices that were predetermined by Staff and professional Lobbyists before they even came to the Council. The new Council will still have to overcome those with good listening and basic good judgement, something I think all of you appear to have the potential to do.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:47pm CST

Thanks for your comments, Brad; could you clarify what you mean when you say "staff still has the advantage to game this system?"

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 3:37pm CST

Would not want to assume what Brad was thinking, here are some thoughts.

City Council has the authority to make and pass ordinances. The City Manager/his staff/CoA departments have the responsibility to carry implementation of these ordinances. Sometimes the needs and desires of the various departments are different than the desired outcome of a particular department.

Dan McAtee at January 10, 2015 at 5:04pm CST

A process for written comment via the COA website. The current "email the mayor & council" function is next to useless due to lack of response to input. COA needs to set expectations for response; "within 24 hours"; "2 business days": "we don't have the answer now but _____ will contact you no later than _____". Basic communications

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:47pm CST

Thanks for your suggestion, Dan. -Moderator

Susan Pantell at January 12, 2015 at 2:49pm CST

I think it would be good to try this, but one concern is that if only four districts are represented on the committee, people who are not from those districts may have less impact on the proceedings because the Council members will be less concerned with opinions not from their district.

Some issues might need to be reviewed by the entire Council from the beginning because of their importance for the city. Some examples of that type of issue from the past are the consideration of changing the management structure for Austin Energy, Water Treatment Plant 4, and the Urban Rail proposal.

It's not clear to me where issues regarding libraries, pools, recreation centers, etc. would fit in the proposed committee structure.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:49pm CST

Thanks, Susan; where would you recommend issues regarding libraries, polls, recreation centers, and other topics fit? And what alternative would you suggest to address the issue you mentioned with district representation on committees?

Susan Pantell at January 14, 2015 at 12:41pm CST

Maybe they intended it to go under Housing and Community Dev. One idea is to move trash and recycling from Environment to Utilities, Resource Recovery; move parks from Environment and include that with libraries, pools, etc under a new committee, "Community Services", and keep the "Environment" for longer-range planning and policy issues like sustainability, open space purchase, climate change, and water resources.

I don't have an answer for the district representation issue on committees; I think it is a potential problem. As suggested above, I think for big, important issues, all of the Council may need to be involved from the start, partly because of this concern.

Shari Farrell at January 12, 2015 at 4:20pm CST

A designated area on the AustinTexas.gov website allowing for public opinions on what issues should be considered for agenda items, responses on what decisions were made; which would allow for some tracking of the impact of the conclusion, and a place that tracks all meeting notes, items, conclusions as well. A website dedicated to allowing the public to help decide what constitutes an agenda item (by majority - without a few people leading the conversations...) - follow the minutes and notes as if they participated in the sessions, and allow for responses of conclusions the impact conclusion has made on citizens/city. This is a way to allow the public to participate in sessions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - even when the issue is regarding Parks and Libraries which are very importation to many citizens. Short videos can be used as well.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:50pm CST

Thanks for your feedback, Shari. -Moderator

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 11:23pm CST

I was referring to this site:

http://austincouncilforum.org/viewforum.php?f=2

Could be modified to link the all agendas, data, etc in other sites.

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 3:55pm CST

There is an area on the CoA website for public input. Start there, and modify as needed. Save time/money.

Coapublic Information admin at January 14, 2015 at 4:12pm CST

Thanks, Ma Ma--this, in fact, is that site.

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 11:11am CST

I know of several efforts to bring forward resolutions after as many as 8 years of work, through the commission structure, subject to repeated delays by legal and by staff, believing all the challenges had been addressed - only to see them derailed on the same business day that they were to go before council by a lone voice. It's maddening. If the new committee structure means that by the time a resolution gets to council, all sides have had a chance to weigh in, build consensus, and craft a resolution will work for the majority of stakeholders, and cannot be

derailed by one of two individuals with a bully pulpit after everyone else has worked together for months or years on a workable solution, then let's try it.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:50pm CST
>
> Thanks, Jennifer; can you be more specific about the cases you mentioned? -Moderator
>
> **Jennifer Houlihan** at January 13, 2015 at 4:59pm CST
>
> Most recently, the busking ordinance. It was expected it would pass on consent at the final meeting of the year, but was pulled due to a late objection. The issue is not whether the last-minute complaint had merit and deserved consideration; but rather that months and months of work had gone into the most recent version with ample time for public comment, and all processes and procedures had carefully been followed, yet the outcome was still knocked off schedule. That's a problem with the system, that there can still be stakeholders that late in a conversation who feel they've had no chance to weigh in. If it takes another layer of meetings for people to believe there are enough opportunities to raise their voices on issues that matter to them, then let's get 'em on the books!
>
> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 14, 2015 at 8:54am CST
>
> Understood; thanks, Jennifer. -Moderator

chris grigassy at January 13, 2015 at 12:31pm CST

Order all Council staff, and all City staff to stop using "The Delphi Technique" at City facilitated public meetings and surveys!! That deceptive method isn't really asking for citizen Input, but citizen Agreement--for ideas some "expert/s have put forward. And please educate yourselves about this deceptive method that has caused many of us active citizens to quit trusting the City!

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:51pm CST
>
> Hi, Chris--could you provide some examples where you have seen that technique used during public meetings and surveys? -Moderator
>
> **Ma Ma** at January 14, 2015 at 4:03pm CST
>
> Had not heard the label of this technique though I've seen this used. A meeting facilitator is not supposed to have any vested interest in the meeting outcome. Any consolidations of topics or inputs of the meeting is to be done in full view and with consent of the meeting attendees.

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 11:40pm CST

Thanks, am not aware that council sessions use a meeting facilitator. I have seen meeting leaders (who participate in the meeting) and time keepers. A meeting facilitator is process focused.

I have seen the "delphi technique" applied when participation is consolidated in a manner to present desired result and when surveys are designed to achieve desired results.

Coapublic Information admin at January 14, 2015 at 4:14pm CST

Hi, Ma Ma--can you clarify...are you saying you have seen facilitators act as if they do have a vested interest in the outcome? And on the second point, can you explain more about what you may have witnessed to the contrary? -Moderator

chris grigassy at January 13, 2015 at 12:42pm CST

www.vlrc.org/articles/110.html is the link to explain the Delphi Technique manipulation of citizens.

Heyden x at January 14, 2015 at 11:39am CST

When setting up committees land use and transportation need to be on the same committee. We got into this mess by considering land use and transportation separately - they need to be considered together so that we all recognize how one directly affects the other.

Coapublic Information admin at January 14, 2015 at 4:15pm CST

Thanks for the suggestion, Heyden. -Moderator

Joep Meijer at January 14, 2015 at 12:24pm CST

I understand that the intent is to have 4 council member serve on each council committee. I would urge that some committees would see a broader representation, in particular the oversicht committee on Austin Energy. Austin Energy is the most important asset of the city, it is responsible for a large contribution to the city budget, it impacts affordability for all residents and low income families in particular, and is the biggest opportunity to cut our emissions and use more renewable energy. This committee will also discuss additions to the traditional business model. All in all, a very important committee that deserve the attention of more council members, perhaps not all, but at least seven would be a good starting point.

Coapublic Information admin at January 14, 2015 at 4:14pm CST

Thanks for the suggestion, Joep. -Moderator

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 4:15pm CST

Believe the intent of the committee process is to have a specific number of council members sit on these committees. But nothing in the proposal would preclude any member from attending. (Providing meetings are not double booked, but that is just schedule management.)

Each council member has a responsibility to their district AND a responsibility to the entire city. A balance will be needed to prevent entrenchment.

Mary Voltaggio at January 15, 2015 at 11:52am CST

In general, the ideas presented are a good start. Committees can be a double edge sword: On the one hand, they can serve to evaluate, prioritize and go forward, or they can turn in to a swamp bog where nothing moves. There would have to be transparency or Committees could be seen as trying to manipulate the outcome. Each Council member must come up with a way to gather input from their district (via website, town hall, survey/polling, etc.) early in the process, so that time, money, and resources are not wasted. Larger issues like energy, water, or transportation may require a mayor-led town hall or public forum. Taxpayers are probably more irritated by the relentless "studies" conducted by the city that cost of lot of money and end up going nowhere.

Rick Rick at January 15, 2015 at 1:50pm CST

I think Ma Ma and Chris are referencing some of the City meetings that we "all" have participated in over and over again. I'm thinking of the stickers voting through the Imagine Austin process that eventually wore me down after about 18 meetings, and the Project Connect process where "everybody knew" what the Project Connect Team wanted and that is what "won" the contest, which then failed at the polls (so there! why didn't you guys listen to us?). These meetings of citizens are staged it seems to pull the public to an endpoint that someone else has dictated from all high at the City. This is a reality; not a conspiracy theory.

I would put all discussions and comments on the internet and let people comment in that forum. It could even be summarized to a list up to 20 questions per topic, and allow the people to vote. A subscription process will be needed to try to stop the stuffing of the comments.

Horacio Gasquet at January 16, 2015 at 11:08pm CST

I like the idea of having committee meetings focused on a topic specific agenda. But, it is not sufficient to just listen to people talk. How does that input get converted into policy? It is not clear what the follow up is, when a citizen has a great idea.

pinaki Ghosh at January 17, 2015 at 11:06pm CST

A fundamental issue here from compliance perspective - if 4 council members can bring an issue to the agenda then it should be more than 4 members who can bring it to public hearing - else we can see formation of cotarie - this means we will need 5 council members to bring it to public hearing - which also means these 4 have to win over one more council member to bring it to public hearing - from Governance Risk Compliance perspective this is a very standard operating procedure. This is change I will request the city to make

Joshua Canter at January 19, 2015 at 10:25pm CST

I like this idea, this it's great and could really help things!

Therese Baer at January 20, 2015 at 9:03am CST

I vote "Yes" on this proposal. Let's try it, as is. it if doesn't work well, then let's modify it.

Mary Reed at January 20, 2015 at 1:13pm CST

While I appreciate the fact that the city is trying make the public hearing process easier, less time-consuming, etc. as President of the Clarksville Community Development Corporation (CCDC), the neighborhood organization for historic Clarksville (www.historicclarksville.org), I feel very uncomfortable having important matters related to my neighborhood -- demo applications, proposed zoning changes, etc.-- heard only by a portion of the Council, even though the the full Council would vote on them.

How would those Council members who do not serve on a particular committee gain an understanding of all of the facts and nuances related to a matter before they vote on it? I fear that important information may get "lost in translation" and as a result some Councilmembers will end up voting on an issue without complete knowledge.

Also, what if certain Council members who heard a matter discussed in committee try to color the information that was presented during a hearing when they discuss it with the rest of the council, maybe because of ideological or political reasons?

I much prefer an opportunity to make my case to all of the council even it it means that I have to spend hours at a Council meeting. I think the Council will make better decisions when all members have the opportunity to be equally informed.

Michael Michael at January 20, 2015 at 3:33pm CST

There should be a separate Council committee on affordability and a Mayor's cabinet on affordability. It was the pervasive theme throughout the Mayoral campaign and Council campaigns, and it is at or near the top of every Austinite's priority list. It deserves to its own committee as opposed to being merely included as a subset of other committees.

Joseph Reynolds at January 20, 2015 at 4:52pm CST

The committees must be consistent with State Law. Under the City Charter the Council is one instance of the Land Use Committee [Planning and ZAP being two others]. Hearing land use items in a sub-committee isn't constrained by law, but the Council has to remain as the responsible body. Any land-use subcommittee will need to be structured such that every one of the 10 Council members get's to hear items in their district. Four member subcommittees won't work unless there are three of them with parallel duties. And, items are going to arise that cross district boundaries - the development of the State Land at 45th & Bull Creek Rd is one such, members Gallo [d-10] and Pool are directly involved and Tovo represents on of the Neighborhood Associations in the Coalition. Working a subcommittee structure will be difficult.

Perhaps not planning to close an item in one Council Meeting would help, actually have 1st, 2nd, and 3rd hearings.

Perhaps pushing hearings into Boards and Commissions, with a higher standard for appeal to council is needed.

Liz Haltom at January 21, 2015 at 11:31am CST

It's the behind closed door lobbying that's the problem. When I was advocating for an issue at City Hall, by the time the public hearing rolled around, everyone's mind was already made up. It was visibly obvious. Showing up to testify changed nothing. The public needs to know what information and arguments decision-makers have already been presented with and by whom and when, so we know what other information City Council needs to hear and can get there knocking on doors at the same time as the lobbyists. I'm very disappointed to see that none of these proposals address bringing more transparency to the before-hearing lobbying that goes on.

Andrew Bucknall at January 21, 2015 at 3:45pm CST

Having Chaired a task force committee, the Urban Renewal Board and Urban Transportation Commission as well as serving on the affordable housing commission (now CDC) I have noticed that council committees can often have the same purpose as established citizen boards, commissions and committees. As Jennifer Houlihan talks about this means an issue can go through a very long vetting process and result in a council committee or council not even knowing about the previous process as they move forward or react to an agenda item with little to no information. I think it is very important to look at how existing boards and commissions interact with council committees to increase understanding and communication so the vetting that occurs at the existing citizen level is communicated forward. I assume through this process there will be a continual review of citizen committees to determine duplication of efforts,

necessity by law and reorganize based upon information. Establishing a metric to evaluate boards, commissions and council committees may be helpful in this re-org process.

Bob Batlan at January 21, 2015 at 8:00pm CST

Comments for your consideration relative to the New Council Committee Proposal.

1. Public testimony to committees should be scheduled in evenings so that working people have a chance to be heard.
2. The mechanism to allow an item to be added to the full council if requested by four council members may be helpful, but is not sufficient. The committee structure would tend to have council members concentrate on the issues related to their committee assignments. Their concentration on other issues would most certainly be more limited. Therefore, it will be difficult for non-committee members to evaluate requests from outside their areas. A public petition process should be developed and added as a way to bring an item to full council in a timely manner. A fair, but rigorous petition process would prevent frivolous requests. However, it would allow a path to bring important items that did not receive committee support to the full council. I assert it would be more effective for all than having individuals and groups shop for council sponsors.
3.
4. All Council Members should be on a Committee on Austin Energy.
5. A formal review of the effectiveness of the new structure should be conducted and recommendations adopted before the end of FY15.
6.

Thanks for considering this input.

I would be pleased to discuss these items at your convenience.

Bob Batlan Austin Interfaith Strategy Team

Sumit DasGupta, Retired Senior Vice President of Engineering, Silicon Integration Initiative, Inc. at January 22, 2015 at 11:31am CST

Excellent idea. Also, this may be a repetition but I would recommend that minutes of all meetings be posted on a city web-site for public awareness / comments before a proposal is put on council agenda.

Susana Almanza at January 22, 2015 at 11:35am CST

At the present time, numerous recommendations & resolutions are heard by specific Boards & Commissions, they are then forward to City Council. Does that mean that the 13 committees, will be an addition to the already established Boards & Commissions? Or will the council

committees replace the current Boards & Commissions? How will the 4 council members be selected for the council committees, what is the process? If the council committee makes a decision opposite of the impacted community, will the community be given the opportunity to speak to the full Council? WE, PODER, are also concerned about the discussion of online emails being tallied. We still live in a digital divide and those with access & knowledge of using electronic means could easily out number impacted low-income and/or people of color.

> **Susan Lippman** at January 22, 2015 at 3:26pm CST
>
> These are all excellent questions. I hardly know how to express an opinion on the proposed structure without knowing the answers to these. Especially important is: how are the 4 selected? Perhaps it should be all voluntary, with a minimum of 4. I agree with some of earlier commentators that Austin Energy certainly is important enough for a larger committee.

Heidi Gerbracht at January 22, 2015 at 12:19pm CST

On behalf of RECA, we are supportive of public testimony happening earlier in the process, and to having items go through committees first. Having opportunities to engage remotely, whether it's by computer or by telephone, is immensely valuable in giving access to folks who have not traditionally been able to show up at City Hall- those with children or jobs with long hours or a lack of transportation, etc. It will be important to weigh that feedback equally to feedback from those who show up at meetings, if we're truly going to make local government more accessible to everyone. If remote input is possible and weighed equally to in-person testimony, then an hours-long public hearing becomes less necessary, and it's less likely that one loud voice drowns out the voices of the many. It may also be useful to consider a time certain ending to public hearings as well, even if that means more public hearings have to be scheduled. The one area in which we'd urge caution is with land use. Much of the process for land use decisions is guided by state law, and it's an in-depth process already. We're hopeful the changes can make the development process more predictable and help stakeholders work better together, and we'd like a process that is not lengthier and more expensive. Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

Carol Lee at January 22, 2015 at 4:46pm CST

The committees may add value for "deep dives" into issues but I am concerned about relying on the committees to craft positions and finalize Council decisions, and for the Committees to be the primary input for public hearings. With 13 Committees I am assuming that some would meet during the normal work hours and others in the evening, and I've read that not all would have Channel 6 coverage. It would be public-viscous to expect citizens to monitor the agendas of 13 Committees and have public testimony prepared within 3 days of the Committee meeting. What

would be extremely welcomed is an improved Public Notice system, whereby any citizen could "subscribe" to be notified of items based on selected filters. The current paper-based Public Notice system is very costly and ineffective. I also think it is extremely important for the full Council to serve as the Board for both of our public utility entities as Austin Energy and Austin Water Utility are our largest public assets.

Tom Fitzpatrick

The goal to make Council meetings less onerous and more accessible to citizen participation is a good one. Going forward, consideration should continuously be given not only to facilitating public participation, but to honoring that participation by adhering to plans and agreements that result from it. Seeing plans ignored and agreements overturned after the citizens have gone home trusting they have made some difference – is a recipe for diminishing both trust and engagement long term.

I have three comments about the use of committees to facilitate public hearings.

1) While the idea of breaking out council work into committees is entirely reasonable, a structure of too many committees has potential dangers also. The way forward should monitor closely the total amount of time and the number of meetings that results from the committee structure. If, indeed, a resolute Council Member intends to track transcripts and recordings of committees that he or he does not attend, the system quickly becomes more onerous rather than less so. And if a citizen wants to track what's going on and when it may be effective to participate, a smaller number of venues is much easier to monitor.

2) On the subject of public hearings being primarily at committees rather than full council (absent a special request), it should be noted that citizen engagement and citizen activism are not necessarily the same thing. Some Austin citizens, for whom we are grateful, spend enormous time and attention tracking and trying to help shape the city's policies, programs and development. Many other citizens are either not able or not inclined to track meetings and the work of elected representatives they would like to trust. These citizens only get engaged (and show up at hearings) when something is far enough along and far enough off the rails that someone they know sounds an alarm. These folks may be less likely to engage at a committee hearing when the scope of a problem or an inconceivable departure from expectations has developed and been revealed. The purpose of the system design should be to enhance trust and engagement, not to require constancy of vigilance.

3) The number of committees should not silo the work of Council or further encourage siloing the work of city departments. In particular, I believe that logical integration of rules and concerns could be facilitated by combining several of the combined committees, and dividing their agendas into the subareas originally proposed. I suggest combining:

- Mobility
- Public Safety
- Planning & Neighborhoods
- Open Space, Environment, and Sustainability
- Housing & Community Development

Economic Development and Innovative Industry Development should also be combined (again maintaining the separate agenda rubrics).

Topic: Third Proposal: Dramatically enhance access to and completeness of minutes, back-up, tracking follow-up action on resolutions, and other records of Council Committee and Commission proceedings to support transparency.

The proposed strategies would include the creation of accessible documents that clearly explain Council processes to public.

What are your thoughts on this proposal?

Feedback Summary

- Documentation access
  - Little ease and accessibility to information **(not user friendly)**
  - Hard to navigate and process current online postings
    - Different departments and commissions **lack consistency** on posting protocol and timing
  - Background information used in the decision process is not always available
    - Ex- data, amended agenda times, etc.
    - City Manager studies / evaluation for resolutions are not easy to locate.
  - Request **notifications for updates on actions taken** by council on draft agendas, meeting minutes, presentations, etc.
- Council Member access
  - Negative responses on the amount of 'literal locked doors' that council members sit behind
  - Contacting council members does not always result in direct response

25 Responses

Tim Thomas at January 09, 2015 at 5:32pm CST

I'm not sure how this is different from now. We have access to a huge amount of data. I'd love to get to 100%, but I don't think the majority of citizens are suffering from a lack of data. They're suffering from too much data and not enough time to process it. The way our city has created patchwork ordinances over patchwork ordinances means that you have to commit yourself to understanding the issue at hand to understand most of what goes before council.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:52pm CST
>
> Thanks for the feedback, Tim. -Moderator

Brad Parsons at January 10, 2015 at 11:55am CST

Yes. Generally speaking, unless a person is very adept at navigating the many different City information applications and varied webpages, most of which are not user friendly, it is hard for most people to follow what the City and Council are doing. Particularly I agree, the Minutes of both Council and Commission meetings in the past have been inadequate. In the case of the Council, the Minutes are often badly transcribed. In the case of Commissions, there often are not Minutes posted even after the fact of any useful detail.

As for followup actions on resolutions, yes, there has not been a systematic display to the public connecting followup actions particularly on Council resolutions requesting actions by the City Manager. One has just have to be aware of them and recognize them when they appear again on the Agendas.

Point to mention, the last Council passed A LOT of resolutions in the past 6 months asking the City Manager to study or evaluate one thing or another, those need to be tracked and noticed to you all and the public when the City Manager starts bringing those slew of items before you.

I might add, you the new Council are not obligated by any resolution that the prior Council asked the City Manager to look into. Further, the new Council should seriously consider taking a look at a number of ordinances to potentially be rescinded that the last Council rushed through in their final year when they saw the handwriting on the wall after the 10-1 Commission was able to complete their task.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:54pm CST
>
> Thanks for the suggestions, Brad. Any specific ordinances you would like the Council to review? And what would you like to see included in minutes that isn't there currently? - Moderator

Josh Rabinowitz at January 10, 2015 at 1:53pm CST

Not entirely related to transparency, but I'm not sure where else to put the request: I'd like to get email or RSS updates on actions taken by the council in addition to draft agendas, and maybe email or Facebook reminders of city council meetings being streamed over ATXN. As has been mentioned earlier, availability of info is not a problem. I think Austin does a better job than most with transparency, though better minutes and follow-ups to resolutions are certainly necessary improvements. This is something that just winds up not being at top of mind because announcements of council activity are relatively quiet in a noisy world. Not actively reaching out to let people know about meetings could be viewed as a move to reduce transparency, though I don't believe that's what's happening here.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:56pm CST

Thanks for your suggestion, Josh. -Moderator

Susan Pantell at January 12, 2015 at 2:30pm CST

I agree with the proposal and not with the people who say the information is adequate. Often, the back-up information for resolutions, including the actual resolution language, is not available until very soon before the meeting. I'm on the email list to receive Council meeting agendas, but major changes are made to the agendas between when I receive it and the actual meeting, and I receive no update. When measures are amended during the meetings, as they often are, it is very difficult to find the exact language that was approved.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:56pm CST

Thanks, Susan. -Moderator

Debbie Russell at January 20, 2015 at 5:50pm CST

...and sometimes the language isn't available until the item is being presented :-(

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 11:23am CST

Last year, I participated in a hackathon with the goal of creating a tool to increase city civic engagement. The idea was that citizens could sign up for meeting alerts, by keyword (water, dog park, bus fare, Austin Energy) based on posted agendas and backup and project updates. They could then pass the alert via social media to friends/colleagues with a shared interest in that issue. So what happened? Our programmers quit before the end of the first day. The City has multiple "project management" platforms, and a single project could be in multiple platforms, in different phases, yet not share a common ID number. The consistency and amount of background materials posted doesn't have a particular standard, and every department/commission has its own way of doing things, so while you may find the powerpoint presented at one commission, that same presentation presented to another commission is not posted. The timing of how quickly materials are posted after they are received/discussed varies widely. In sum, the basic data hygiene was so uneven as to make any kind of modeling or mining practically impossible for software - much less a regular person with a job and two kids to get to soccer practice, trying to stay informed in real time. For a city that talks so much about tech, we have a lot of ground-level work to do.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 3:57pm CST

Thanks, Jennifer; how would you suggest the City approach this challenge? -Moderator

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 5:04pm CST

I'd start by talking to Lewis Leff in the Office of Sustainability. His team (I think he was with CM Riley's office at the time) at the hackathon had a very similar idea, and was already a bit farther down the track with theirs, including mocked-up screenshots and suggested functionality. And I've give this to the Office of Innovation, not an IT team, to reengineer. My two cents.

D Sitko at January 13, 2015 at 6:22pm CST

I think that a single site/source with all information would be helpful. As others have mentioned, items are often disparately placed or require a burden for an individual to locate. Timely information shared via social media and email listservs is also appreciated.

Andria Castillo at January 14, 2015 at 10:14am CST

The one area of concern is the number of potential committees. Many of the committees can be interdependent such as affordable housing and possibly providing social services in those affordable housing areas. Even the community block grants are used to support health and human services programs. By having so many separate committees, there could be a redundancy of conversations and silo decision making instead of encouraging collaboration and leveraging financial resources. My feedback is to consider broadening the committees scope with more of a vision for what they could accomplish then assigning the appropriate departments, etc to them. Granted some committees need to be separate for legal reasons but not all 13 possible committees.

Charlie Dismore at January 14, 2015 at 4:39pm CST

Totally concur. Documentation must be comprehensive, detailed, and available to the public at our request.

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 5:28pm CST

I see this in two parts: 1. Access by the average citizen to information already available 2. Additional information needed/desired by citizens not currently available

1. There is a lot of information out there, but it can be so time consuming to locate. In the private sector there are websites that are simply organized and menu driven, yet contain huge amounts of data. Something that starts from CoA main page so anyone can find it.
2. It is often the case that back-up information used to make decisions is unavailable or so hard to find it is virtually unavailable. Also there times that discussion occurs on the dias about data I have not been able to locate. Lastly, there have times when agenda items are amended during an active council session. The amended item is not available to the public. Pieces of paper are flying around. Sometimes even the

> council members are confused. Again in the private sector there are meeting applications that can be edited on the fly and seen by all both physically in the meeting via large screens and computers, and those viewing remotely.

Austin has tremendous business and technical expertise in its' citizens. Don't spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on studying the tools and applications out there without leveraging this expertise first.

Rick Rick at January 15, 2015 at 1:54pm CST

I like this guy Ma Ma. He seems to have some good ideas.

Therese Baer at January 20, 2015 at 9:04am CST

I vote "Yes" on this proposal. Let's try it, as is. it if doesn't work well, then let's modify it.

Debbie Russell at January 20, 2015 at 5:43pm CST

Slightly off topic...but I think this should be folded in somewhere in this discussion: we should enhance access to COUNCILMEMBERS.

Once upon a time...up to around 2007/8, anyway...there were no locked doors or "gatekeeper" ahead of those locked doors to council offices. Many see that step as symbolic of our council-of-old's unresponsiveness (that 10-1 was hoping to address).

Back at the old city hall...I could just walk into Goodman or Slusher's offices - speak to THEIR gatekeeper/receptionist - sometimes there wasn't even that--they had less staff than cmbrs do now (so it's not like they can't handle a walk in here and there), but were more than happy, if they weren't already in a meeting or about to have one, to talk to you if even for a few minutes. The door to the council offices at the new hall wasn't locked until somewhere around the end of Mayor Wynn's/beginning of Mayor Leffingwell's term.

These were the days of "round robin" meetings/skirting the open meetings act...of too many back door deals that resulted in bad public policy (a water treatment plant to treat water we don't have; subsidies for the richest corps in the world, etc.). Locking the doors and having to tell outer-chamber receptionist who you were/why you wanted to drop in and maybe hand an aide something or whatever, smacked of this not being "THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE" as Cmbr. Houston noted inauguration night.

Let's truly make this OUR seat of gov't again, please.

Debbie Russell at January 20, 2015 at 5:49pm CST

PS: you can't call it "security"...we already pass through metal detectors...which we didn't used to have to 'back in the day' either.

Karen T at January 20, 2015 at 6:16pm CST

Now that we have our own Councilmember in our own district, the City might actually get more citizen input. And those citizens are not going to necessarily know where and how the information is available that some folks who have been involved in government have been accustomed to over the years. So that should be considered.

There are issues that have occurred over the years that I had no clue was going on .... until the rules were actually in place. The one I remember clearest is when the hours for watering our lawns were changed. I remember the "stake holders" had their meetings and came up with "the hours" for watering yet none of the stake holders apparently still watered with a hose - making the middle of the night hours unrealistic for some of us with hoses. Stuff that affects homeowners, like watering and this crazy ban on plastic bags, should get some real input from citizens. But I will tell you - when these things were happening at City Hall, I had no clue. There needs to be a way to communicate to the public before these things happen so that real input can be gained and I'm pretty sure, most citizens are going to need a primer on how they could participate. This is the right time to change the mindset when it comes to participation. Folks just need to figure out how to make it user friendly. Look in the employee pool and find who is good at doing this kind of work.

Sumit DasGupta, Retired Senior Vice President of Engineering, Silicon Integration Initiative, Inc. at January 22, 2015 at 11:34am CST

Thanks,... this topic relates to my comments on the previous item.

Susana Almanza at January 22, 2015 at 11:52am CST

Currently, transparency and efficiency of posting of Minutes and Backup, is a great concern. The new website is not easy to navigate. Residents need time to review items that will be voted on and/or discussed. There is need for improvement in Topic 3. Council meetings need to be rotated and held in the specific council districts. City Hall is not accessible to all, especially when there are to many items on the agenda, you can't find parking. District representatives need to be meeting in the community, not just City Hall, let's bring some real change and real public engagement. District representatives need to inform their District residents about upcoming items that will impact the District and/or City wide changes.

Heidi Gerbracht at January 22, 2015 at 12:26pm CST

Not completely on topic, but on the availability of useful information: How about a way to opt in to getting emailed notice of meetings as soon as they're posted, with a link to the agenda? Many of us will be interested in multiple committees, and assuming the clerk will post notice of them per usual, it would be nice to be able to opt in to automatic email notice of posted meetings so you don't miss meetings because you forgot to look at the website one day. This

will be especially useful now that we'll have more Council and subcommittee meetings to pay attention to! Thank you.

Carol Lee at January 22, 2015 at 4:55pm CST

I agree that the City's record-keeping, and public access to records, needs to be improved. Take advantage of current technology and bring the City's information management into the 21st Century!

Topic: Fourth Proposal: Take immediate steps to Initiate longer term improvements for public engagement

Proposed strategies include discussing the following issues during a “deep dive” session with the entire Council for the purpose of soliciting ideas to enhance staff’s current engagement efforts:

- Evaluate creating a mediator position (on staff or contract) to reduce conflict for planning, zoning, contracting, and purchasing issues.
- Initiate a public process to research, obtain public input, and make recommendations to Council on best practices for public engagement in city government. Create Public Engagement Task Force supported by experts in public engagement best practices.
- Align City Commissions with Council Committee structure over time to enhance public engagement and better address Commission recommendations.

What are your thoughts on this proposal?

Feedback Summary

- Mediator position
    - Positive- more efficiently for meetings
    - Negative- seems **redundant** with council member positions
- Engagement Outlets
    - Positive feedback for current outlets like Speak Up Austin, surveys, polls and other commentary forums.
    - Request **more web based platforms for meeting attendance and engagement in real time** (similar structure as the twitter / phone call in / text in poll meeting held on 1/22)
        - More remote ways to engage and provide input (ex- IN districts)

34 Responses

Tim Thomas at January 09, 2015 at 5:35pm CST

- How would a mediator help? The Council Members are the mediators. Deligating to a whipping boy may make it easier to go back to the voters, but it's abdicating responsbility.
- A best practices system would be worthwhile.
- Aligning Commissions and Comittees sounds good.

I'd add that the biggest process is not that we are lacking in public input. Someone will always lose. On most issues we need far less public input. We don't need 20 people showing up in person to reiterate the same 20 bullet points that they've already sent to council by email. We need a council that can stand up to voters and make decision quickly.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:21pm CST
>
> Thanks for your input, Tim.

> **Fritz Knopg** at January 15, 2015 at 10:56pm CST
>
> I don't agree that "we need a council that can stand up to voters and make a decision quickly." Not at all. The Council's job is to listen and absorb. And then after gathering all the facts and organizing them, the Council should carefully and even slowly if necessary come to a decision & plan to implement the citizens' ideas and wishes. The Council members should not be considered experts, any more than (or even as much as, in some cases) the citizens. Austin has lots of brilliant citizens.
>
> Also, the citizens need to be given a decent amount of time to present their case! This is not happening now. Enforcing rigid cut-offs does not have good results: Important information is often missed this way, plus the practice of guillotine-style timekeeping is exhausting and insulting to the populace!

LaTisha Anderson at January 09, 2015 at 5:51pm CST

Depending on the situation a Mediator could be efficitive. Could also cut down on the challenges that could or would have been resolved by a mediator but instead are being addressed by Council Members.

> **Coapublic Information** admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:21pm CST
>
> Thanks, LaTisha. -Moderator

Sarah Hicks at January 10, 2015 at 4:12am CST

A smartphone app. The app could be designed for free by allowing any resident to submit a prototype. Citizens could come to this site to choose the winning design. Winner gets major

publicity and their name goes on the app. Anyone who has been a resident for two years or longer is eligible to buy the app for their phone for $5.00. All proceeds go to the homeless for food and shelter. The app could have several topics for locals to view and vote on what they feel should be reviewed by the council. The proposals with the highest votes would then have a chance to speak to council. Less people at meetings, less time wasted, and better accuracy on public opinion. If anyone has a problem with the $5.00 one time fee, two hours of community service could waive the donation. One vote per citizen each meeting on each topic. Citizens with no smartphone could purchase a voting ID that could be used to cast vote via phone, internet, or dropbox. Conflicts could be settled without a mediator or the council.

Will Will **at January 10, 2015 at 5:24am CST**

That would be against the Texas Constitution Sarah as a municipality cannot require payment in exchange for a vote. It also runs afoul of the Texas Open Meetings Act. Two hours of community service in exchange well that violates the US Constitution. It is a governmental body, not a correctional institution. Besides you can email council from a smartphone, which many working class people cannot afford in the City of Austin because they are nickel ed and dimed by Austin Energy, thanks Larry Arnold Weis, not. But they need to cut his pay in half at least, ditto with Ott.

Sarah Hicks **at January 10, 2015 at 4:32pm CST**

It isn't a "payment" it is a donation, for software, not a vote. The "municipality" wouldn't receive the money, the less fortunate would. I apologize for the use of the word "vote" in my idea, as I was using the Webster/Oxford as reference not freedictionary.com. Let's use choice instead. The app would only serve as a voice for the public to deliver their choice on issues, not a final decision. Everyone in the community has a way to speak up, even more so than now. I would think with a way to organize public opinion the efficiency of the council and decision making time would benefit. I also provided a free way for those who want to be involved in the poll. Community service should be every citizens contribution back to the community.....not punishment. Sustainability in anything requires contribution from the strongest to the weakest. I would never suggest something unconstitutional. My idea considers everyone in the community and offers solution. How ignorant to view the term "community service" and associate it to prison. Community service is the most important and honorable contribution a citizen holds. You should try it. There is no need for the constant defensive opinion in society.....it only creates more problems.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:24pm CST

Thanks for the suggestion, Sarah. Have you seen such an app anywhere else? - Moderator

Rich Heyman at January 10, 2015 at 10:34am CST

Institute participatory budgeting in the districts: http://www.ward49.com/participatory-budgeting/#Intro

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:23pm CST

Thanks for your suggestion, Rich. -Moderator

Brad Parsons at January 10, 2015 at 12:12pm CST

Sounds good, but in the end it still depends upon the true listening willingness of the Council members to the public and your good judgement to understand when you the Council are being served bad or biased information, false assumptions, predetermined conclusions and the like. I was pleased to see at your first orientation meeting that it was clear all of you are sufficiently skeptical and probably understand that.

I will mention an example. Staff told you at the first orientation meeting that they are constantly on the lookout for assumptive potential problems on the horizon that could create problems, but they tried to give the impression that everything is under control and the City is in a great position. I can tell you something that is happening right now and quite possibly could give you a big problem with revenue and budgeting within a year or two, OIL. For those of you who were here in the late 80's, you know what I am talking about.

Two other points, your biggest CRISIS issues that Staff has not gotten under control are WATER and TRAFFIC. In fact, paying tax dollars to promote the city actually makes those two CRISIS problems worse. There are a lot of false assumptions underlying the WATER and TRAFFIC issues; you will have to weed through those. But, you can be certain, WATER and TRAFFIC are CRISIS issues that Staff and the last Council have not solved.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:22pm CST

Thanks, Brad. -Moderator

Kevin Tuerff at January 11, 2015 at 6:49pm CST

To truly get public opinion from the 860,000 residents of Austin, budget for independent market research on solutions for major issues facing the Council. Each district should also have a budget Council members to communicate with their constituents.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:23pm CST

Thanks for the suggestions, Kevin. -Moderator

Rollie Cole at January 11, 2015 at 8:37pm CST

Engagement AT City Council is a tiny piece of the puzzle. Engagement WITH City Council should be the long-term goal. That includes before, during, and after City Council meetings. Technology, such as a software app, can help -- but only if the council members remain committed to engagement with the citizens they represent. Activities like this request for comments, with opportunity to vote on the comments of others, is a good example of the type of thing the council could do for all sorts of major issues facing the city. Ask citizens for ideas, ask cities for data, ask citizens for opinions/reactions to the data and ideas of others, and re-present the results on web sites like this one to allow for further engagement. Polls and surveys are good, especially the kind where you can see the intermediate results as soon as you submit your response. Work with places like the Annette Straus Center at UT for more ideas on engagement WITH city council, not just AT city council meetings.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:32pm CST

Thanks for your suggestion, Rollie. -Moderator

Mike Mike at January 13, 2015 at 10:04am CST

What people really want is the ability to submit their opinion and to have someone actually listen to it and to consider it when making decision that affect their lives and taxes. Actually attending a council meeting is inconvenient, has traffic and parking issues, ect. Perhaps improved electronic public engagement would help. Attend live by web and improved email or web community feedback during and before meetings would help engage with the public. The key is to let people know their opinion is being heard and considered.

Coapublic Information admin at January 13, 2015 at 4:40pm CST

Thanks for your input, Mike. -Moderator

Jennifer Houlihan at January 13, 2015 at 11:33am CST

First, it's council's job to mediate the disputes that make it to that level. In my experience, by the time they get to that point - zoning or otherwise - there have already been mediation efforts, conversations with CMs, and a significant investment of time by staff. Be Solomon: you were

elected to make hard decisions. And second, if you want to use tech to help build the relationships between council and the public, I'd start with replying to every message that's sent, even if it's just an auto-reply that says "your message has been delivered." And it's not enough for the councilmember to be available to communicate and be service oriented - it applies to their staff (and other city staff) as well. I recently had an issue come up on a weekend and needed an answer from the city, but wasn't sure who to call. One CM's staff got back to me that day with the contact info for the person I needed, and had let them know I'd be calling. A second CM's staff got back to me the next day, with some (but not all) of the same info. And the third CM's staff sent me a form email on Monday, letting me know they had filed some sort of form on my behalf...and it was two weeks before I was called by that office, saying "Hey, we just got this - isn't this the thing we fixed weeks ago?" I'd respectfully suggest working on some of the basics before worrying about revisioning a new mediation structure.

> **Coapublic Information** admin **at January 13, 2015 at 4:41pm CST**
>
> Thanks for the input, Jennifer. -Moderator

D Sitko **at January 13, 2015 at 6:30pm CST**

I support the investigation into best practices and aligning committees and commissions. I do not believe a mediator is necessary in general although a nonpartisan, independent facilitator may be merited for certain special meetings/executive sessions. I wholeheartedly support the idea of a web based platform during the council meetings so that residents can listen, view, and submit comments and questions in real time without having to actually attend the meeting. These could also be used for committees or special meetings on given topics (e.g. work groups). The Federal Government uses this website for public comment on Federal regulations. Perhaps Austin can model something similar. http://www.regulations.gov/#!home They also post matters in the Federal Register, again, Austin could design something similar https://www.federalregister.gov/. Lastly, one potential useful source for insight on how to improve our process is the Center for Effective Government http://www.foreffectivegov.org/open_accountable_government.

> **Coapublic Information** admin **at January 14, 2015 at 9:15am CST**
>
> Thanks, D. -Moderator

Charlie Dismore **at January 14, 2015 at 4:49pm CST**

We don't need a Mediator to facilitate between citizens and Council. We don't need another Task Force to engage the public in city management activities. The best way to engage the public will be to ensure that our voices are heard and paid attention to in the decisions made on our behalf. As most folks know, participation in City votes has been woefully low - in the neighborhood of around 8 to 10 percent of registered voters. My opinion of why is that most

people do not care enough to get involved. And for those who do, they have not been successful in changing the direction of ill-advised spending of public money. We have high hopes the 10-1 format will begin to make a difference, with Council votes being watched and our representative held accountable by his or her constituents. We do not see a need to align commissions with council committees. Their input is available through the City Manager and Staff.

Ma Ma at January 14, 2015 at 7:15pm CST

How various citizens feel about their input to council

-Some citizens might feel they are being listened to, only if the council responds and acts upon their input. Since some of these individuals are very active in the local political process, the squeaky wheel theory applies. Interaction with our representatives is part of our governmental process. But each citizens input should be given equal weight. - Sometimes individuals give input as representatives of an organization or advocacy group. That also is part of our governmental process. But the Council should use caution to ensure that the majority of people in these organizations truly feel the way they are being represented.

Rick Rick at January 15, 2015 at 2:07pm CST

If this topic is to "go back to the drawing board" and start fresh ... why not allow each District to focus on its input to its District Rep, at the District Level. BUT ... we need to have the discussions / meetings with our District Rep IN OUR DISTRICT and NOT downtown. That has always been the problem. The "silent majority" is back in the district while the "vocal minority" is flapping its chops at a City Council meeting.

If a Mediator function is created, those people should roam from District to District, holding meetings and absorbing the feel of the City, heading off big problems, with the help of each District Rep at that local meeting ... Just an idea.

Fritz Knopg at January 15, 2015 at 11:07pm CST

I think:

1) No moderator: the Council is the moderator.

2) Hear from the Citizens their ideas on "best practices." You could hire a 'Conductor' (rather than an "expert") to oversee a few meetings where the Citizens expressed those ideas to the Council.

3) Don't start separating everything into Districts. This is ONE city, with many parts, but we all live together and we all care about all the parts (or should).

pinaki Ghosh at January 19, 2015 at 10:42pm CST

All these new hiring scares many people - more cost. There are 2 questions

1. How do the council committee complement the city commissions?
2. How they will co-ordinate the job of public outreach?

The question implies that City Commissions are not doing a proper job of involving the public where necessary for long term discussion - this is true but hiring a new set of people will not solve this. We have to make the communication procedure better.

One great example is how Ken Mori communicated about the 10-1 - a lot of people got involved and one bad example is how accessory building plan got passed without much public involvement. But ultimately we are talking about more effective city commissions with better public input and better communication so lets focus on that process.

Therese Baer at January 20, 2015 at 9:11am CST

I'm not sure I understand this proposal. A real-life example would be nice.

Karen T at January 20, 2015 at 5:54pm CST

Drives me nuts when I hear the City wants to hire someone on contract. Do we not have competent City workers? Are we not growing more competent people every day? This is Austin. We should have the best already! If you are going to conduct business differently, you may have to do a little reorganization to get the right people in the right roles. But please, no more tax dollars to have an outside party recommend something. Our own City workers ought to know best.

Sumit DasGupta, Retired Senior Vice President of Engineering, Silicon Integration Initiative, Inc. at January 22, 2015 at 11:41am CST

There is one topic that I am not seeing any mention of,... which relates to organizational effectiveness in city administration. During the last elections, I heard off-the-cuff remarks about this and that there was no oversight of this anywhere. The city should be run like a business, and like all businesses, there should some oversight, with benchmarking with other cities, to determine how effectiveness can be enhanced, as part of a continuous process. This should be a topic for either the proposed "Finance" or "Audit" committees. Citizens with extensive business experience should be sought out for advice and counsel.

Susana Almanza at January 22, 2015 at 12:12pm CST

The City doesn't need to hire a mediator. To many times, staff has been making the decisions for communities without consulting with the impacted communities (looking at developers view only). Staff needs to be incorporated into the council committees. Let people engage, make sure that meeting times are accessible to the working class people, those who are not paid to be at the council meetings. District representatives should host meetings in Districts about upcoming agenda items for that District and items on City-wide impact. This would at least inform residents about upcoming votes and/or discussions on particular items. At least the residents would be informed about what would be taking place in their neighborhoods and whether they wished to be more engaged. Imagine City Council District representatives engaging with their constituents on a regular bases.

Heidi Gerbracht at January 22, 2015 at 12:36pm CST

Just a note that any mediator would need to be aware and incorporate the fact that there are almost never just two sides in a discussion on city policy or even on a zoning case. Also, there are rarely individuals who engage in the process who represent the interests of the city at large- specifically with regard to zoning- the neighborhood and the developer are not the only parties with interest in the decision, even though they're usually the only voices represented in the conversation. As for RECA, we would support and participate in any efforts to make longer term improvements in public engagement.

Carol Lee at January 22, 2015 at 5:10pm CST

Is a Public Engagement Task Force with experts necessary? We have lots of Staff who have fancy titles and formal training to be a public servant. I think the problem has been more an issue of sincerely wanting to engage the public. If there are any efforts to establish a District Office for any council members, please inventory the City-owned facilities to find and develop an appropriate space that would allow for the same citizen participation at the District Office as at City Hall. The District Offices could provide space for CMs to meet with constituents as well as the public to provide testimony (via televideo). Consider allowing citizens to remotely provide opinion on an issue (i.e., whether support/oppose/neutral, comments, which district reside in, any affiliations with organizations affected by the action, etc) rather than having to go to the kiosk at City Hall.