

Neighborhood Assistance Center

Strategic Plan 2016



August 22, 2016

**City of Austin Planning and Zoning Department (PAZ)
—Neighborhood Assistance Center**

austintexas.gov/departments/neighborhood-assistance-center

Summary

This document describes the scope of services provided by the Neighborhood Assistance Center (NAC) within the City of Austin Planning and Zoning Department, reviews the accomplishments of the NAC in FY 2013, and outlines a plan for the work to be accomplished by the NAC in FY 2016.

Background

The NAC was established in early 2009 and two Neighborhood Advisors were hired to staff the Center in March 2009. The Neighborhood Advisors were intended to provide Austin area neighborhood groups with better access to the City's resources, processes, and how to be proactive in decisions made that affect neighborhoods. An internal audit of the NAC was conducted in February 2012. The audit made two key recommendations:

1. A plan be developed and implemented to ensure proactive educational programs and outreach to provide equal opportunity access to the NAC services for all City Neighborhoods.
2. Internal controls should be developed and implemented to insure appropriate guidance is provided for NAC staff and a framework for documenting, reviewing, and monitoring procedures are developed.

The Neighborhood Advisors were assigned a front line supervisor within the Comprehensive Planning Division of PAZ in December 2012, and all subtasks identified under the 2012 audit have subsequently been completed.

Mission of the Neighborhood Assistance Center

The Neighborhood Assistance Center provides educational resources and information about City of Austin's operations and services. The center facilitates and assists effective communication between neighborhood stakeholders and the City of Austin.

Staffing and Organization

The NAC is currently staffed by two full time Neighborhood Advisors. The NAC provides service to multiple divisions within the Planning and Zoning Department and serves as a resource for other City departments as well as neighborhood groups. Within the reporting structure of the City, the Neighborhood Advisors report directly to a Principal Planner within the Comprehensive Planning Division, and participate as members of the Implementation Team within Comprehensive Planning.

Future Expansion: The NAC was originally envisioned to be staffed by four full time Neighborhood Advisors; however, to date only two of those positions have been funded and filled. As the NAC grows its capabilities, and as demand for NAC services grow, it is possible that the remaining positions would be filled in the future.

Programs

Through its various programs, the Neighborhood Assistance Center provides a targeted range of services to its internal and external customers.

Information and Referral Services

The NAC provides information and referral services to individuals who contact the Center or are referred to the Center. As part of this function, the Neighborhood Advisors answer questions, aid customers in identifying and accessing City resources via the website, and refer stakeholders with issues outside of the scope of the NAC to 3-1-1 or the appropriate City Department. The information and referral services are targeted to the varying needs of neighborhood groups attempting to navigate the City system, and are provided as a supplement to other information and referral services provided by City departments and workgroups including 3-1-1, the Public Information Office, and the Development Assistance Center within the Development Services Department. The Neighborhood Advisors provide assistance via telephone and e-mail. All contacts to the NAC are recorded in an “Issues Register” spreadsheet, and individuals contacting the NAC are asked to respond to a satisfaction survey regarding the services received. While the Neighborhood Advisors endeavor to appropriately refer anyone who contacts the Center, the Center’s focus is on providing information and resources to self-identified neighborhood associations and similar groups.

This plan calls for continuing to provide these information and referral services, and increasing the diversity of the neighborhood groups who access these services.

Education and Training

The NAC provides education and training on City processes and resources that may be of interest to neighborhood groups, including neighborhood associations, neighborhood plan contact teams, and other neighborhood groups registered in the City’s Community Registry. To date, NAC education and training has been provided primarily on an ad hoc basis and in partnership with other City Divisions and Departments.

This plan calls for formalizing the education and training program by designing and implementing a series of trainings and educational opportunities that can be hosted by the Neighborhood Assistance Center throughout the year.

On-Line Education and Engagement

The Neighborhood Assistance Center directly maintains several useful resources on the City website including a Neighborhood Assistance Center webpage, and an on-line help document for the Interactive Development Review Permitting and Inspection system (aka external AMANDA). Neighborhood Advisors also provide support to Public Information staff engaged in maintenance of the Community Registry. One of the two Neighborhood Advisors serves in a dual role, working in partnership with the Public Information

staff and various department content owners to maintain the Planning and Zoning Department resources on the City of Austin website.

This plan calls for enhancing the education and engagement materials available to neighborhood groups through the Neighborhood Assistance Center webpage, improving the usability of other Planning and Zoning web resources for neighborhood groups and other members of the public, and partnering with the Communications and Public Information Office and other City departments to get the word out electronically about NAC services.

Consultation and Outreach Support

The NAC partners with other City Divisions and Departments to facilitate neighborhood stakeholder feedback and input on City-driven projects, programs and basic services and provides neighborhood engagement consultation and advice to departments embarking on public involvement activities relating to projects, programs and services. The NAC also coordinates with the Communications and Public Information Office to provide information to stakeholders for city/area wide projects and City planning initiatives, to provide assistance with department alignment with adopted public engagement principles, and to support Communications and Public Information Office-driven outreach and engagement initiatives. The NAC has historically provided these consultation services on an as-requested basis.

This plan calls for continuing to provide these consultation services and outreach support, and developing a strategy to make more City work groups aware of the scope of consultation services provided and when to take advantage of the expertise provided by the Neighborhood Advisors.

Engagement of Neighborhood Groups

The Neighborhood Assistance Center serves as a liaison between the Planning and Zoning Department and various neighborhood groups including the Austin Neighborhoods Council, Neighborhood Associations, and other geographically-based community groups that have self-identified within the Community Registry.¹ The Neighborhood Advisors attend regular meetings of the Austin Neighborhood Council and other groups, participate in discussions between neighborhood groups and the City related to development and other topics, and have coordinated engagement activities around particular topics on an as requested basis.

This plan calls for continuing to provide on-going engagement of the neighborhood groups that have traditionally accessed NAC services, reaching out to additional neighborhood groups through a variety of means in order to increase the diversity of the Neighborhood Assistance Center customer base, and developing engagement activities that create opportunities for increased trust and collaboration between neighborhood groups and the City.

¹ The engagement work of the Neighborhood Assistance Center is complemented by an additional Planner within PAZ who serves as the primary point of contact for Neighborhood Plan Contact Teams, which serve a unique function under City Code.

FY 2015 Accomplishments

The Neighborhood Assistance Center had numerous noteworthy accomplishments in FY 2015 including:

☑ **Improved Management Controls.** In FY 2015, the Neighborhood Advisors became part of the Neighborhood Involvement and Implementation Team within the Planning and Zoning Department. The Neighborhood Advisors continue to maintain an "Issues Register" spreadsheet to record all public requests for information and services and the resources/referrals provided to each.

☑ **Information and Referral.** In FY 2015, the Neighborhood Assistance Center received and recorded in the Issues Register approximately 379 requests for information and assistance. All of these requests were responded to within 2 days and fulfilled or referred to the appropriate City staff.

☑ **Customer Satisfaction Survey.** In FY 2013, the Neighborhood Assistance Center launched a customer satisfaction survey and began including a link to this survey in their e-mail signature line. 85% of the NAC customers who took the survey in FY 2015 reported that they were “very satisfied” with the services they received from the NAC.

☑ **Consultation.** The Neighborhood Assistance Center provided consultation to numerous City Departments and initiatives in FY 2015, including:

- Ongoing participation in Communications and Public Information Office initiatives including: Conversation Corps, and Community Registry database improvements.
- Ongoing support to Communications and Technology Management launch of a new public portal for AMANDA , and a new interactive web map, “Property Profile”.
- As-requested, consultation with Review and Inspections, Economic Development, and Music Dept. staff regarding a variety of neighborhood concerns and economic development issues.

☑ **Outreach to Neighborhood Groups.** In FY 2015, the Neighborhood Assistance Center provided education and outreach to neighborhood groups, including:

- A NAC promotional flyer was produced, posted on the website and direct-mailed to groups identified as a neighborhood or home-owner association in the Community Registry.
- "Meet Your Neighborhood Advisor" presentations were made to five neighborhood groups in FY2015.
- Neighborhood Advisors attended Neighborhood meetings as requested, including standing monthly meetings of ANC, ANC-East, and Montopolis Community Leaders.

☑ **On Line Tools Training.** The Neighborhood Advisors have designed a training curriculum for neighborhoods on web-based on-line tools related to development and development review. In FY 2015, the Neighborhood Advisors successfully delivered this curriculum to approximately fifteen representatives of neighborhood groups in July, and six Neighborhood Plan Contact Team representatives in August. All of the post-training evaluations from attendees were positive.

☑ **Website Improvements.** In FY 2015, the Neighborhood Advisor with responsibilities to managing department web pages, continued to make improvements to the website.

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