

# Overview of the Austin City Government

## Authority to govern

Municipal authority for cities in Texas can be divided into two main categories: general-law cities and home-rule cities. General-law cities are usually smaller communities that operate under the general laws of the state. General-law authority means that a jurisdiction may only exercise the authority it has been given by state or federal law.

Home-rule authority means the jurisdiction may establish any law or ordinance it wants to unless it is expressly forbidden by state or federal law. Austin is a home-rule city.

Home-rule cities operate under charters. The City Charter is considered Austin's constitution. The Charter provides the basic outline for the structure of Austin's government and all city ordinances must be consistent with the Charter. An ordinance cannot amend the Charter; the Charter can only be amended through local elections.

## Form of government

The council/manager form of government is the most popular form of city government across the United States. It was a product of the progressive movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during a period of political corruption. It was designed to remove politics from the delivery of municipal services. This form combines the political leadership of elected officials with managerial experience of an appointed city manager.

The City Charter of Austin establishes the council/manager form of government and defines the respective roles of the council and the city manager. In this form, the mayor and council are responsible for setting city policy, approving the city's budget and determining the tax rate.

The city manager is responsible for proposing and implementing budgets, and implementing city policy by directing the day-to-day operations of services, including the hiring and firing of personnel. The city manager is accountable for the state of the city and serves at the pleasure of the elected council.

In 2012, Austin voters elected to establish a geographic district-based system composed of ten council members and a mayor. The Mayor is elected at large, while each council member is elected by their respective district.

Terms for both the mayor and council members are 4 years.

Service is limited to no more than two consecutive terms. However, a council member may seek additional terms by collecting signatures from at least five percent of the qualified voters through a petition.

## Laws that govern local government

There are numerous laws in place designed to protect employee jobs and wages. State civil service laws mirror our federal laws designed to take the politics out of who *gets* a government job and who *keeps* a government job. Wage protection laws cover issues such as minimum wage and eligibility for overtime pay.

"Sunshine" or "open government" laws are designed to make government open and transparent to members of the public. Open meetings rules serve to make sure the business of government is open to the public. Nearly all city council meetings are open for the public to attend. A few notable exceptions include situations related to

personnel issues, real estate negotiations, and legal advice or counsel.

Open records rules ensure all documents are made available for public examination. Again, there are a few exceptions for situations involving litigation, medical or criminal circumstances.

You will learn much more about open meetings in another training module.

### **City of Austin structure**

The City of Austin is an organization made up of 45 departments and offices employing over 15,000 civil service and non-civil service employees.

All city departments report directly to the city manager, except the Municipal Court, Municipal Court Judges, City Clerk and City Auditor who report to the mayor and council.

The collection of departments is organized into 6 basic categories according to the nature of the services they provide:

- Safety
- Health & Environment
- Culture & Lifelong Learning
- Government that Works for All
- Mobility, and
- Economic Opportunity and Affordability.

This separation of reporting structure within the organization creates a natural checks and balances between the operational and oversight branches of the organization.

### **Financing local government**

City departments are funded in one of two ways, enterprise funds and general funds. Enterprise fund departments, like Austin Energy, Austin Bergstrom International Airport and the Austin Convention Center run their operations like a business and

charge a fee that covers the cost of the services provided to customers. General fund departments are financed by several sources such as sales and property taxes, service fees, and profit transfers from enterprise departments. In addition to funding department operations the city's budget must also account for the repayment of revenue and general obligation bonds and other debt services.

### **Financing major capital projects**

The financing of major capital improvement projects such as new roadways or new city parks and facilities, comes largely from the issuance of bonds. Bond proposals are developed with community involvement and authorized through public elections.

### **Community involvement and public accountability**

The Austin community has long played a major role in setting policy direction and ultimately the operations of the city. The city has approximately **70** advisory boards and commissions made up of community volunteers appointed by the mayor and council. The city televises many of these meetings including all city council meetings to provide members of the public access to local government proceedings. The city encourages the development of neighborhood associations and provides assistance in developing neighborhood plans that help shape the growth and future of each neighborhood. The city holds periodic Town Hall meetings, community forums, and public hearings to allow members of the public the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions directly to their local government.

It is essential the city develops mechanisms to demonstrate its accountability and ensure it is responsible to the needs of the community. Some of these mechanisms include, performance measures built into the

annual budget that let the public see the results they can expect from their tax dollars; complaint tracking systems and annual surveys to collect data on the concerns and priorities of members of the public. The city also has a 24 hour call center for members of the public to report or request non-emergency issues such as pot holes or water main breaks. The collections of these mechanisms ensure that the City of Austin is responsive to the needs of the community.

## City Vision and Mission

All the components we have discussed in this session must work together to provide effective municipal services. What ties all this together is the city's vision and mission.

Our vision statement is a description of what we want Austin to look like. It is the aspiration the city has for the future. Organizations use vision statements as a way to unify the collective energy and resources of people who can influence the future. Each of us; whether public official, employee, or even members of the public, contribute to the City of Austin's vision to **be the most livable city in the country**.

This means that we want Austin to be a place where everyone can participate in all the opportunities it offers. We want a community where residents share a sense of belonging and pride in the vibrancy and richness of culture and diversity that is Austin.

The vision to be most livable belongs to the entire community, and the municipal government of Austin has an important role to play in realizing this vision.

As an organization, the city's mission statement reflects the role municipal government has in making Austin most livable. That mission is for Austin to be the best-managed city in the country. Our mission to be the **best-managed city** compels every board member, elected

official, and employee to make recommendations, make decisions, and take actions that would be considered a best-practice for other communities. By following the guidelines and procedures laid out in this training, you have an opportunity for your board to function as the model other communities can aspire to.

Thank you for your service as a City of Austin board or commission member. Your efforts will enable the City of Austin to further its vision of being the most livable city in the country.