

Background Information on Current Engagement Methods for City of Austin

Task Force on Community Engagement

Prepared by Larry Schooler

Manager, Community Engagement Division

Communications and Public Information Office (CPIO)

Larry.Schooler@austintexas.gov

(512) 974-6004

- **Conversation Corps**

Launched in the spring of 2015, Conversation Corps enables the City of Austin, Capital Metro, and the Austin Independent School District to expand the reach of their engagement efforts through the deployment of trained hosts/facilitators (Corps members). Each month, hosts convene conversations on a different topic of the month at different kinds of venues in all ten City Council districts (churches, cafes, etc.). Hosts summarize the conversations for agency staff (from the City, Capital Metro, and AISD), who then incorporate the feedback into the policymaking process and convey to Conversation participants how their feedback affected policy decisions. Thus far, more than 60 Austinites from across the City have become hosts, and beginning in May, monthly discussions attracted hundreds of Austinites to venues across the City. A multi-platform marketing campaign is planned for the fall. Leadership Austin is providing administrative support for the program—which is governed by an interlocal agreement. Travis County is expected to join the program later this year.

- **SpeakUpAustin.org**

Cognizant of both the tech savviness of Austinites, and the difficulties many face in attending face-to-face meetings, the City built SpeakUpAustin.org as a destination for Austinites interested in weighing in on policy issues and offering their ideas for improving the City. The site gives the public opportunities to discuss policy proposals; review policy options; complete surveys on current conditions; and recommend new programs or policies. Citizens championed a bike share program on the site, and Austin B-Cycle developed out of that SpeakUpAustin.org idea, still the highest-vote-getter on the site. As of now, more than 4,200 Austinites have registered on the site, while many thousands more have taken surveys without registering, in cases where City departments elected not to require registration. City staff designed the site's functionality and interface in partnership with a local technology company; subsequently, Granicus licensed the software and now provides administrative support. CPIO is preparing a significant revision to the user interface and experience in the coming months.

- **e-comment** (Commenting on City Council items)

The Communications and Public Information Office has spent a considerable amount of time looking for the best tool to enable the public to comment on City Council agenda items online. Mindful of the duration of Council meetings and the difficulty much of the public has in attending them, CPIO examined several tools for online agenda item comments, including eComment, produced by Granicus (the company that supports SpeakUpAustin.org). The tool enables the user to click on an agenda item, review background material, express their support or opposition to the measure (or express neutrality), and offer brief comments. The tool helps capture all comments into a report delivered to decision-makers. Recently, CPIO has had discussions with a California-based company called Civinomics, which has developed a test platform for a pilot project of online agenda commenting. A third firm, POLCO, based in Texas, has also reached out to CPIO with interest in developing such a platform. CPIO continues to examine online agenda commenting options in search of the best solution.

- **CityWorks Academy**

The Austin CityWorks Academy is an inside look at Austin government – a unique opportunity for Austinites to learn about the City’s governmental processes, its procedures and the people who deliver these services through a series of 12 weekly classes. Executive team members, department directors and other City staff will host unique, interactive and informative sessions designed to give Austinites hands-on experience in City government operations. A total of 42 City Departments participate in CityWorks Academy, including: Police, Fire, EMS, Animal Services, Austin Energy, Public Works Department, Transportation Department, Austin 3-1-1, and the Department of Homeland Security. Since its inception in 2009, the Academy has graduated a diverse group of nearly 200 Austinites.