

Task Force on Community Engagement Meeting Notes: February 11, 2016

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Executive Summary

On February 11, 2016 the meeting convened at 7:40 p.m. when a quorum of seven members was achieved. The meeting was held at the offices of Leadership Austin. **Citizen comment was provided by Jeff Jack.** The group approved the January 28, 2016 minutes with **no changes**. The group agreed to send Michael McGill, senior auditor with the City of Austin, a written summary of their informal discussion in response to the question “Are the City’s communication and governance structures effective in supporting neighborhood planning efforts?” The input would not be characterized as coming from the entire Task Force, but names of those participating in the discussion would be listed. Notes on this informal discussion are shown on pages 3-4.

There was **grave concern about the lack of a quorum** interfering with the group’s ability to accomplish their work by the deadline. The group asked Diane Miller to contact City Council members whose appointees have missed a number of meetings, to let them know that this is a concern. At the next meeting the group will also take up the issue of changing the number required for a quorum because at least one more member appears to have resigned, bringing the active membership to 12.

The group **concluded their recommendations on Theme #2 - Make it easier for community/public to give input.** They added the following recommendation.

- (H) Use innovative meeting practices that enable online or virtual participation during live meetings. (This should include meetings of the City Council, Boards and Commissions, town hall meetings, and other City engagement activities.)

They also **agreed on two recommendations on Theme 3: Explain how input will be used and show how that input had an impact on the decision made.**

- (A) When the City designs an engagement opportunity, provide feedback in a timely manner to participants on what was heard and how the input is being used to inform future decisions. Also make this information easily available to the general public.
 1. Follow up by email or text with all participants who provided such contact information. Thank them, advise them what’s happening and invite them to receive updates and/or participate in future engagement opportunities.
 2. Ensure that plain language is used when describing decisions made.
- (B) Use technology more effectively to provide feedback to those who gave input.
 1. Use electronic voting for all Council votes in order to push real-time results on such decisions.
 2. By doing electronic voting at Council, it would allow information to be pushed out using other platforms.

They will **continue discussing Theme 3 on February 25th**, including a possible recommendation concerning the role of Boards and Commissions in community engagement. They will also **begin working on recommendations for Theme 4.** Members agreed to come to **the February 25, 2016 meeting prepared to propose their top recommendation for Theme 4.** These proposed recommendations may come from those included on Bloomfire or be a new idea and should be a recommendation that meets the global criteria.

Member Attendance List

Celso Baez
Richard Fonte
Chris Howe

Claudia Herrington
Koreena Malone
Navvab Taylor

Sara Torres

Action Items

Who	What	When
Task Force	Discuss adjusting the quorum number due to drop-off of members.	2/25/16
Claudia	If needed, call in to the 2/25 meeting in order to create a quorum.	2/25/16
Diane M.	Change the settings on access to the draft report on Google Docs so members without Google accounts can access.	2/12/16
Diane M.	Include in the draft Executive Summary a narrative that includes the big philosophical points discussed by the group, e.g. access and importance of and interest in online engagement, want engagement opportunities to be conversational; meet people where they are. Conversations that anyone can follow – no jargon. Include the Work Group reports and survey results in the appendices. Identify things that need time and money.	ongoing
Task Force	Complete Workgroup summary reports so they can be included in report appendix.	3/10/16
Diane M	Ask the City Auditor's office if Michael McGill's contact information can be shared with those members who didn't participate in tonight's discussion, as some of them have a great deal of experience with neighborhood planning efforts.	2/16/16
Diane M	Contact members who have missed a number of meetings to let them know that the group requested that Diane contact their Council member to let them know about concerns regarding appointees missing meetings.	2/19/16

Meeting Notes

Citizen Input

- Jeff Jack shared an experience at a recent stakeholder meeting on “closing the funding gap for special events”. The process included facilitated table discussions on policy ideas. Mr. Jack characterized the process as “suboptimization” because there was a predetermined agenda or assumption from the onset that such events are good for the City and therefore that it is important to close the funding gap. He is deeply concerned that the event didn't focus on the larger big picture question of whether such events are compatible with the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Discussion Notes on City Auditor's Request

The seven members of the Community Engagement Task Force whose names are listed below discussed and agreed on the following response to the City Auditor's office request for information on the question “Are the City's communication and governance structures effective in supporting neighborhood planning efforts?”

As a whole, the City's governance and communication structures that support neighborhood planning efforts are more traditional in nature, but the City has tried some innovative processes. There are both strengths and limitations in the current structures as shown in the chart below. This Task Force has found similar patterns in the City's community engagement processes. One big picture concern of this Task Force is that only about 47% of the City is covered by a Neighborhood Plan.

Strengths of current structures	Limitations of current structures
The contact team as a concept could be a great model. They also serve as a “go to” place for City staff and leaders.	The contact teams need much more communication support and increased membership to be maximally effective. Contact teams have membership requirements that not everyone could meet.
City has tried innovative processes including providing child care, having events during non-working hours, and doing online engagement.	Processes continue to reach only a limited segment of the residents.
Planning Commission members are willing to come speak to neighborhood planning groups.	The Neighborhood Planning group only makes recommendations – there isn’t shared or participatory decision making.
	Follow-through is limited or difficult after the Plans are done. After such intense engagement, many volunteers don’t continue to be engaged. Once a Plan is adopted, how do you keep people engaged?
	The process takes a LOT of time and work over a two year process. Those involved need to be very informed because the issues are complex and can be hard to understand without considerable study, which places an undue burden on lower income people.
	Attending in-person meetings is difficult or impossible for many people.

In our Task Force work on community engagement we have identified similar limitations in accessibility, clarity and understandability of information, adequate feedback after the process, and adequate city staff support. Our recommendations on how to overcome these limitations, therefore, may be of interest to the Auditors. We anticipate the recommendations being finished by April 2016.

Members Present for Discussion:

Navaab Taylor
Sara Torres
Celso Baez

Richard Fonte
Koreena Malone
Chris Howe

Claudia Herrington

Additional Consensus Recommendation for Theme #2: Make it easier for community/public to give input

- (H) Use innovative meeting practices that enable online or virtual participation during live meetings. (This should include meetings of the City Council, Boards and Commissions, town hall meetings, and other City engagement activities.)

Consensus Recommendation for Theme #3: Explain how input will be used and show how that input had an impact on the decision made.

(A) When the City designs an engagement opportunity, provide feedback in a timely manner to participants on what was heard and how the input is being used to inform future decisions. Also make this information easily available to the general public.

1. Follow up by email or text with all participants who provided such contact information. Thank them, advise them what’s happening and invite them to receive updates and/or participate in future engagement opportunities.
2. Ensure that plain language is used when describing decisions made.

(B) Use technology more effectively to provide feedback to those who gave input.

1. Use electronic voting for all Council votes in order to push real-time results on such decisions.
2. By doing electronic voting at Council, it would allow information to be pushed out using other platforms.

Discussion of possible Theme 3 recommendation concerning Bds & Commissions

- There’s a philosophical question to be asked/answered – “Should Boards and Commissions be vehicles for community engagement or are they, of themselves, the community engagement?”
- There’s no consistency in how Boards and Commissions answer that question.
- All Boards and Commission members are volunteers. They would need lots of city support to do effective community engagement.
- Boards and Commissions need to get direct feedback from the Council on what happened to their input.
- Get Boards and Commissions to deal with big picture issues rather than micromanaging Departments. That way they have more basis for meaningful engagement with the community.

Discussion of possible Theme 3 recommendation concerning reporting to Council on public input – timing and requirement for serious engagement.

- We want more synchronization between Departments and Council on input from the community and decisions made. This is especially important for budget decisions. Now there are multiple Department jumps.
- We want faster reports other than email.
- More timeline reports to Council on public input. Timely reports on what heard and make sure all Departments report what they heard.
- Should we recommend that Departments and the Council shouldn’t make major decisions without serious public engagement?
- Should we recommend that community engagement needs to be prioritized because you can’t do a perfect job for every single topic?

Meeting Evaluation

What we LIKED	What we would CHANGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting a quorum was great. • Chris’s comment about concern that members are missing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m sorry I was late.