



MEMORANDUM

TO: Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission

FROM: Rondella Hawkins, Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs Officer

DATE: April 13, 2016

SUBJECT: City of Austin Interdepartmental Wireless Task Force Update

INTRODUCTION:

The extraordinary proliferation of wireless devices and increasing use of wireless voice and data communications by consumers has created a growing demand for quality wireless capacity and coverage by providers. The providers must either add the necessary infrastructure or lease it from others to add capacity, increase data speeds and expand coverage. In addition, the City has internal communications needs with a growing demand for enterprise wireless infrastructure capacity, while also supporting the efficient deployment of valuable wireless services to meet the bandwidth needs of everyone.

Multiple providers have contacted City officials and departments, including Austin Energy, seeking permission to install wireless telecommunications equipment (Distributed Antenna and Small Cell) and Wi-Fi systems in the public right of way that are attached to street and traffic light poles, electric distribution poles, and on City buildings or on new stand-alone poles. The requests are concentrated primarily in the Central Business District, Auditorium Shores, Zilker Park and University of Texas area.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK:

Currently, there are no City policies or regulations that facilitate use of the City's public right of way or infrastructure for use by wireless service providers. While wireline communication providers have been granted access to public rights of way and utility poles under state and federal law, wireless telecommunications providers do not have that right. In order for wireless providers to install facilities on City infrastructure or in City right of way, City permission is required that complies with state and federal law, City Charter, City Code, and utility and right of way regulations.

CONSIDERATIONS:

The proposed wireless antenna system installations include overhead, above ground, and underground placement of radio transceivers, antennas, connecting fiber optic cables, amplifiers, power and back-up power supplies, control boxes, cabinets and the installation of poles where needed.

While cities support improving wireless communications services to meet the bandwidth needs of consumers, public safety, and digital inclusion priorities, such improvements must consider other important factors such as community beautification and esthetics, infrastructure impact, and historic preservation goals. Other major concerns include interference with other existing communications systems such as public safety, street light synchronization, wireless meter reading systems, obtaining power sources, while supporting digital inclusion goals and maintaining competitive neutrality among industry providers.

The three regulatory components for these requests by the wireless providers are:

1. Authorization from the City to occupy the public right of way;
2. Authorization to gain access to city-owned infrastructure - electric poles, pedestrian and street light poles, and traffic lights; and
3. Authorization to construct stand-alone poles or use City property and buildings.

ACTION PLAN:

Balancing the diverse interests among City departments, wireless providers, and other stakeholders to develop a strategy on use of ROW and other city resources like electric distribution poles is a very complex task.

Austin Energy is currently updating its wireline attachment standards and developing new pole attachment standards for wireless attachments with the assistance of outside engineering consultants. While it is anticipated that the new standards will allow attachment of some smaller and less invasive wireless attachments, the wireless standards must take into consideration Austin Energy's capacity limitations (many poles are fully subscribed with communication attachments). The standards must also consider safety, reliability and engineering concerns which limit the number, weight and size of attachments and preclude attachment to the top of electric distribution poles. These limitations and concerns, in addition to the lack of distribution poles in the downtown area because of Austin's underground electric network, affect the electric infrastructure attachment opportunities in the areas where providers have indicated interest.

To address these issues, the City has formed a Wireless Task Force to evaluate competing needs, develop comprehensive policy recommendations, and explore efficient models and solutions necessary to balance the City's responsibilities regarding public right of way infrastructure while considering the needs of the wireless industry and its customers. The fifteen participating departments include:

- Austin Convention Center
- Austin Energy
- Austin Water Utility
- Building Services
- Communications & Technology Management
- Development Services
- Law Department
- Library
- Parks & Recreation Department
- Planning and Zoning

- Public Works
- Public Safety Departments
- Real Estate
- Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs
- Transportation

The City's Innovation Office is directing the process that was kicked off March 28th with fact finding meetings with industry wireless service providers. Additional input on the complex implications of how to best meet this challenge will be gathered from the departmental stakeholders in the coming weeks.

The goal is to have the task force recommendations to the City Manager by early to mid-June, 2016.

The expected outcomes for the task force would include:

- Have a City-wide coordinated approach to wireless and Wi-Fi antenna attachments and equipment placement in the public right-of-way and on City facilities,
- Build a strategy, policy, and operational method that positions Austin for the SMART City, Internet-of-Things future,
- Expand Wi-Fi and wireless capacity and speed,
- Have reliable, ubiquitous, city-wide Wi-Fi and wireless coverage,
- Bridge the digital divide by expanding free public Wi-Fi,
- Encourage market competition, and
- Generate revenue for the City.

We will continue to keep the Commission updated on this process. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.