

July 19th, 2017

Dear Council Member Casar,

Earlier today, the City Manager Search Advisory Task Force adopted a profile recommendation at its final scheduled meeting. The profile recommendation forwarded to City Council affords the City's executive search firm the flexibility to provide qualified City Manager candidates for in-depth review by you and your colleagues. Thanks to the leadership of our Chair and Vice Chair, the Task Force worked collaboratively and effectively to meet the tasks required by Council in a *timely* fashion. Our profile recommendation is worthy of Council's support.

As the Task Force's work unfolded, several unexpected potential risks in the existing process have become clearer. In the sections below, I specify these risks, as well as some suggestions for ameliorating their potential negative impact in the remaining City Manager process.

Black Boxes & Bad Hires

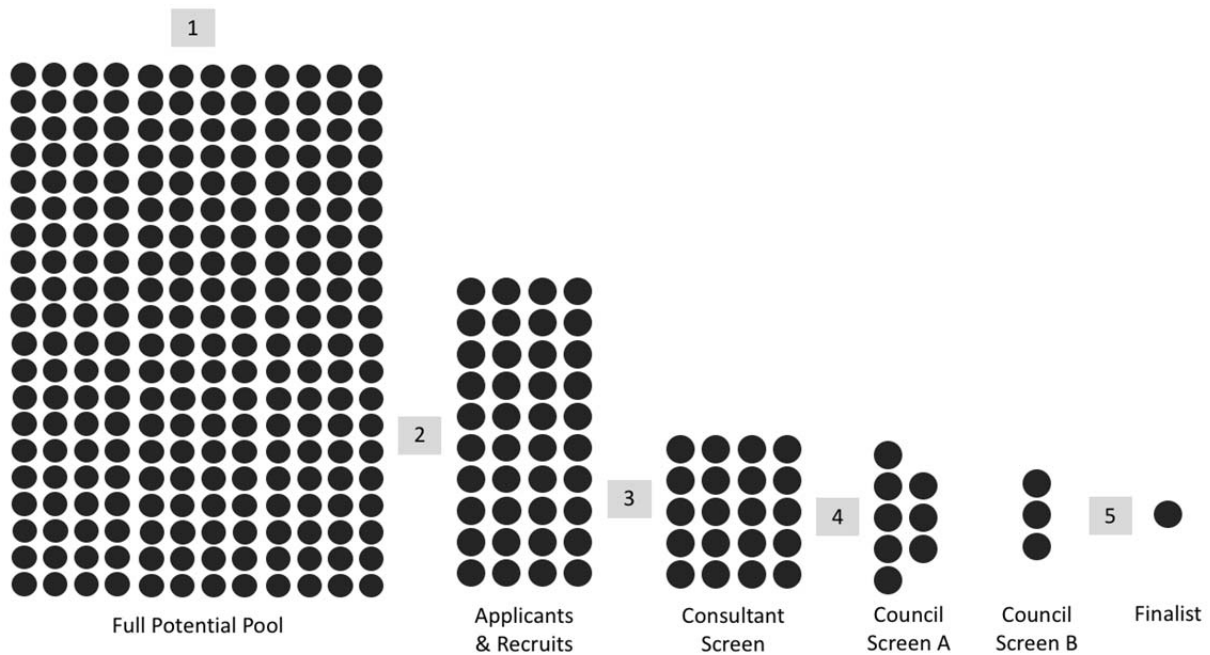


Figure 1. City Manager Search & Selection Process

In its current form, the remaining City Manager search & selection process includes five potentially risky decisions. These are risky choices because their mishandling could lead to substantial misjudgment about the management aptitude of candidates, their qualifications to meet the critical challenges identified by the public, or their fit with Austin's civic values.

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Figure 1 outlines the remaining City Manager search process. Each dot represents an individual candidate. Each collection of “candidates” (dots) is a phase of filtering in the remaining process. The squares represent the moment in the remaining process chronology where risk is concentrated.

The first major risk precedes the actual filtering. This initial risk is the gap between the search firm’s expertise in identifying *general management aptitude* (e.g. team leadership, visioning, talent retention) for large organizations and the community’s desire for *issue-specific* skills (e.g. transportation, IT, code enforcement, capital project oversight). During Task Force discussions, a range from 100 to 200 individuals has been mentioned as the full theoretical potential pool of qualified candidates for the Austin City Manager position. The search firm’s internal catalogue of the full recruitment pool may excessively tilt towards strong generalists with murky track-records on the specific issues prioritized by community input.

Second, the method by which the search firm will select individuals for outreach from its self-identified pool is fully within their discretion. They might be culling from an already existing list of leading public sector managers, or using a highly-customized research process to identify new prospects that precisely fit profile, or something altogether different. Perhaps they will reach out to some of the organizations identified by community members. Or perhaps not.

The third risky decision point is the unknown criteria by which the list of self-directed applicants and recruited applicants (I am estimating 50 credible candidates) will be winnowed down by the search firm to provide their initial list to Council. From Task Force conversations with the search firm’s team, no more than 20 profiles will be sent to Council. Both of these filters provide the search firm with significant discretion in shaping the ultimate course of the City Manager selection process.

The fourth risky decision is the method by which Council feedback or information will be aggregated, presented, and potentially tabulated by the search firm. As you know from Council’s excursion into ranked-choice voting during the February 9th selection of the executive search firm itself, the voting mechanism that is used to aggregate preferences matters. Finally, the design of the more intensive interviewing and assessment of the “final set” of candidates presents the fifth risk point.

Reducing Risk

The risks identified in the previous section can be ameliorated by City Council.

As a way of reducing the potential over-sampling of generalists without capabilities relevant to the identified resident priorities (Risk 1), the search firm could be given a formal request by City Council that the demographic composition, professional background, and areas of expertise relevant to the resident priorities be aggregated into a report for the “Applicants & Recruits” phase, as well as the “Consultant Screen” phase.

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This document should be presented to Council, and hopefully released to the public.

Aggregated information allows for confidentiality while producing public visibility into the diversity and capabilities of the City Manager candidate pool. Additionally, individual Council Members can use their interview time with City Manager candidates to ask more direct questions about the specific priorities identified by our in-district engagement. The Task Force has also offered to participate in the interview process for the “final set” of candidates to ensure fidelity to the priorities identified by residents. These measures can help curtail Risk 1.

During our Task Force meetings, I’ve requested that the search firm consider forwarding to you a collection of candidates that features a few strong outliers in terms of background from the expected assortment of current City Managers and Assistant City Managers. These outlier profiles should have depth in the areas prioritized by residents. Embracing this “rainbow” of candidates instead of a pool of City Manager “shades of gray” is one approach to solving Risk 2.

To deal with Risk 3, Council could request that the search firm present the scoring rubric by which they screen the “Applicants & Recruits” to your staff and the Human Resources staff, as well as their scores for individual profiles. This would allow for their screen to be double-checked while maintaining public anonymity.

To address Risk 4, it might be useful to get ahead of the issue of how Council’s collective measurements of candidates will be tabulated. Selecting a ranking system early can help avoid confusion or frustration, especially if more elegant systems such as ranked-choice voting are contemplated.

Early adoption of said ranking system would also help with Risk 5. Since a diverse range of opinions exist about the design of the intensive interviewing and assessment for the “final set” of candidates, it might be useful to again leverage the Task Force to provide an additional layer of collaborative vetting of the search firm’s recommendations for the last phase of screening.

Finally, I want to once again thank you for this opportunity to serve the residents of District 4. And I especially want to thank your fantastic staff for the support they’ve provided me during my time on the Task Force. They are a great team.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Julio Gonzalez Altamirano