

CITY of AUSTIN Administrative Bulletin



Title **City of Austin Social Media**

Guidelines

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Prepared by Communications & Public Information Department

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Manager's Approval

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "John Ch...", is written over the "Manager's Approval" label.

PURPOSE

Third-party Social Media Platforms are effective resources for sharing information and outreach with the community. Likewise, Public Engagement Platforms used for civic participation have become valuable resources for obtaining feedback and facilitating a two-way dialogue with residents, stakeholders and visitors. All such platforms are components of the City of Austin's communication strategy and are governed by this administrative bulletin, which is designed to provide standards and procedures for the appropriate use of social media for City business.

This policy does not apply to use of social media by City employees outside of their job scope and responsibilities. Personal use of social media by employees on City time is covered under the City's personnel policies.

POLICY

City of Austin policy requires that the use of Social Media Platforms for conducting City business shall be approved by the Communications and Public Information Office (CPIO) in order to ensure compliance with [records control schedules](#) and overall communication strategies. City Social Media Accounts shall conform to specific requirements in terms of account administration and content moderation to ensure content meets appropriate legal and professional standards. This policy applies to all City of Austin departments, offices, divisions, and City staff using social media in an official City capacity.

DEFINITIONS

Social Media Platforms are third-party sites and applications that allow for the creation of user accounts, content, and interaction around a post, event, group, or other area of interest (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Periscope, etc.). Social Media Platforms are used as a communications tool to maximize public views for general awareness, emergency alerts, promotions, and advertising campaigns.

Public Engagement Platforms are third-party sites and applications that allow administrators to obtain public feedback digitally, encouraging civic participation and community dialogue (EngagementHQ, PublicInput, SurveyMonkey, etc.). Public Engagement Platforms are used to gather community feedback and manage online stakeholder engagement processes.

Direct Messaging is the capability on some Social Media Platforms to communicate privately with followers by direct message (DM).

City Social Media Account is an official City of Austin account on a Social Media Platform approved to conduct City business that is managed by City staff authorized to do so as part of an employee's job.

City Social Media Content is the information posted on or shared by a City employee (or authorized representative) on a City Social Media Account to provide general information or promote a City event, program, or service.

City Social Media Content Moderation is the practice of monitoring a City Social Media Account for comments, notifications, and direct messages from the public to provide a timely response from City staff and ensure active communications.

City Social Media User Manual is a [resource guide developed and maintained by the City's Social Media Committee](#) to provide standard practices for staff contributing to City Social Media Accounts.

Records Control Schedule is a document prepared by the City Clerk's Office and identifies the retention period of City records and information retained by each department.

Board Social Media Account is an official account for a City of Austin Board, Commission, Council, Task Force, etc., on a Social Media Platform approved to conduct City business that is managed by current members in coordination with City staff authorized to do so as part of an employee's job.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

CPIO is the coordinating authority for approval, auditing, and governance of City Social Media Accounts. The Chief Communications Director, or their designee, oversees final approval on requests for City Social Media Accounts. The Director will also designate staff responsible for administrative functions (Administrator), including managing records retention and audit schedules.

CPIO may choose to contract with a third-party vendor to assist with records retention and Public Information Requests (PIR) on behalf of City departments. All departments using social media must have their content archived under the same City account. The cost of a third-party vendor for archiving City records may be distributed to departments with City Social Media Accounts.

Department Directors are responsible for ensuring employees adhere to this policy when creating and managing City Social Media Accounts. Each department's Public Information and Marketing Manager or other designated staff are responsible for carrying out the procedures outlined in this policy.

The Department Records Administrator is responsible for ensuring all City Social Media Content is retained according to their department's records control schedule.

The City's Social Media Committee is comprised of employees contributing to City Social Media Accounts. The Committee will have a governing board of at least three members who will serve voluntarily and rotate every two years. Consecutive terms will be approved at the discretion of the Chief Communications Director. The purpose of the Committee is to serve as a governing board, and manage day-to-day employee requests for social media guidance. The Committee will:

- a. Administer committee functions;
- b. Evaluate emerging Social Media Platforms;
- c. Maintain the [City Social Media User Manual](#);
- d. Develop best practices;
- e. Conduct training;
- f. Promote coordinated messaging;
- g. Update this policy every three years or as needed;
- h. Review and make recommendations for the creation of new City Social Media Accounts; and
- i. Perform regular audits of and recommendations for existing accounts.

All recommendations are subject to approval by the Chief Communications Director or designee prior to implementation.

The Staff Liaison to Boards or Commissions is responsible for notifying their manager and CPIO of a request for social media resources by a Board or Commission member.

CORRESPONDING PROCEDURES AND POLICIES

All applicable City of Austin policies, procedures, and administrative bulletins governing employee conduct and communications apply in the administration of this policy. In addition, requirements of the Texas Public Information Act must be met when managing City Social Media Accounts. City Social Media Content must be retained per each departmental Records Control Schedule. Social media should not fulfill a service or work order. Requests for community input intended for use in an official capacity should be conducted through and directed to Public Engagement Platforms whenever possible. If a City Department or Board or Commission wants to use polling or other features on Social Media Platforms, the records generated would follow the retention schedules of Public Engagement Platforms. For additional guidance, contact your Department Records Administrator, and for more resources about contributing and managing City Social Media Accounts, please see the [City Social Media User Manual](#).

PROCEDURE

General Governance of City Social Media Accounts

- A. All requests for City Social Media Accounts must be submitted using the [Social Media Resource Request Form](#). A request will not be approved if there is no funding identified to pay for records retention or staff designated to manage the account.

- B. All requests must be reviewed by the City's Social Media Committee, which will provide a recommendation to the Chief Communications Director and the Web and Creative Services Manager before an account can be created. Each department's Public Information and Marketing Manager or equivalent staff must approve the business case prior to submitting a Social Media Resource Request Form to CPIO. Business case considerations must be clear on staff responsible for maintenance, and include funding to pay for records.
 - a. If an account is created without authorization from the Chief Communications Director, it is subject to immediate deactivation until the Social Media Resource Request Form is submitted and approved.
 - b. After creating an approved account, login information and the designated staff contact managing the account must be provided to the Web and Creative Services Manager.
- C. An inventory with login information and designated staff contacts for City Social Media Accounts will be kept by the CPIO Web and Creative Services Manager and Media Relations Manager. This inventory will be audited and updated annually by the Administrator or his/her designee.
- D. City Departments that create a closed group on any platform must ensure that:
 - a. Its members do not include elected or appointed officials, including members of a City of Austin temporary or permanent board, commission, task force, or other body required to comply with the Texas Open Meetings Act; and
 - b. The page is added to the City's archiving service.
- E. Employees creating or posting information to a City Social Media Account are representatives of the City and must comply with Human Resources policies and administrative bulletins regulating employee conduct.
- F. Employees found in violation of any part of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including discharge.
- G. The department Public Information and Marketing Manager and/or designated employee should confirm City Social Media Content Moderation is regularly occurring to ensure that sites are active, that content is engaging, and that content posted in violation of this policy is handled appropriately (see Section III below).
 - a. For purposes of this policy, "active" refers to a page having been posted to at least once weekly; and "engaging" refers to views, reach, and positive interaction with the posts.
 - b. Annual audits of account activity and the effectiveness of the content being posted will be performed by CPIO and the City's Social Media Committee.
- H. If necessary, the Chief Communications Director may disable a City Social Media Account or prohibit an employee from posting City Social Media Content based on prevailing circumstances.
- I. Non-exempt employees who manage City Social Media Accounts shall monitor, create, maintain, or post on the City Social Media Account only during normal office hours, unless pre-approved by the employee's supervisor.
- J. Staff contributing to City Social Media Accounts, whether as an administrator or content creator, will follow these guiding principles:
 - a. Carefully consider the information you are sharing, as it is widely accessible. All content (both published and deleted/modified) is subject to open records requests.

- b. Before posting or scheduling City Social Media Content, confirm all information shared is accurate, timely, and relevant.
- c. Once social media posts are published, they become a public record and should not be deleted. If incorrect information is shared, post a correction or edit the information and include the word “UPDATED” in the post, as soon as possible if the option is available.
- d. If the City’s contracted vendor cannot archive messages on a particular platform, content creators should save a screenshot of the communication to be retained on a City system.
- e. Respond to comments or messages promptly, especially if a question is asked. Use discretion when engaging with unsolicited and/or controversial content and ensure the City’s response is professional and neutral. Avoid inserting opinions in a comment thread, and be respectful when a response is necessary to clarify information.
- f. Refrain from the expression of personal opinions or positions regarding policies, programs, or practices of other public agencies, political organizations, private companies, or non-profit groups.
- g. Refrain from the expression of personal positions regarding City employees, policies, programs, or practices, and opinions of other public agencies, political organizations, private companies, or non-profit groups.
- h. Ensure comments do not violate the City’s privacy, confidentiality, or legal guidelines for external communication. Never comment on anything related to legal matters, litigation, or any associated parties without the appropriate approvals, and be mindful of “no contact” periods for contract awards or requests for services.
- i. Any content produced and posted to a City account from a personal device is considered public information. This content must be retained in accordance with departmental record retention policies. Destroying public information is a criminal offense.

II. Content of City Social Media Accounts

- A. Information that is proprietary, attorney-client privileged, subject to state or federal privacy laws, and information not subject to disclosure under the Texas Public Information Act should NOT be posted on a City Social Media Account. Any questions concerning this standard should be directed to the Chief Communications Director.
- B. A clear description of the intent, purpose, and subject matter of the account, as well as a notice that Social Media Platforms cannot be used to make open records requests should be clearly stated. When possible, the account profile images will include a City seal. A template for this is available in the [Social Media User Manual](#).
- C. City Social Media Content should be brief and focused in scope and topic, and should complement rather than replace the City’s existing web resources. For example, when promoting a City event, program, or service, include the City webpage, Public Engagement Platforms, or other verified source that has additional information about the subject.
- D. All City Social Media Accounts should provide a specific City contact and City Social Media Content should include relevant contact information when appropriate.
- E. Links on a City Social Media Account’s profile must refer to an official City website. Links posted in City Social Media Content must be an official City website; a state, federal, or local government site (.gov); an educational website (.edu); or an organization with an official partnership, contract, or supportive business relationship with a City department, program or service. Exceptions to this rule must be approved by CPIO, based on the relevance and appropriateness of the request.

- F. Visual content should be appropriate to the subject matter and consistent with the City's graphic standards. See the [User Manual for more detail](#).
- G. Release waivers are not required for photographs or video taken on and from public property unless those pictured will be used in a communications campaign. See the [User Manual](#) for best practices, sample forms, and other recommendations regarding photo waivers.
- H. City Social Media Accounts can amplify (retweet, share, like, etc.) other City Social Media Accounts, official governmental or educational accounts, or accounts owned by an organization with an official partnership, contract, or supportive business relationship with a City department or program. If an organization's relationship with the City is unclear, Departments can contact CPIO for verification and guidance.
- I. Stories or other temporary posts that are designed to disappear within a set period of time may require additional steps to ensure the content is preserved for records retention purposes.
 - a. Any post that has a set expiration date built into the Social Media Platform must be saved to retain an official record. For platforms that do not have options for users to save content to a device, content creators should save a screenshot before the post expires.
 - b. The person posting City Social Media Content is responsible for backing up any posts that will disappear in a location accessible to records administrators.

III. Comment Moderation and Interactive Features

- A. Under no circumstance should users be blocked from City Social Media Accounts. If suspicious activity is noted, staff should report it directly to the Social Media Platform. Please see the [Social Media User Manual](#) for guidance on how to file such reports.
- B. A City department that creates a City Social Media Account that permits interactivity and comments must include a link to [a single City webpage](#) that lays out the City's social media terms of service outlined in this policy. Statements on the page will include:
 - a. The reasons (C(b) below) for which comments may be restricted from public view.
 - b. That comments posted by others to City Social Media Accounts do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the City.
 - c. Notifying people that "follows" from City Social Media Accounts do not reflect endorsements.
- C. City departments and employees contributing to and managing content on City Social Media Accounts must adhere to the following comment moderation criteria:
 - a. Staff should never delete public comments from City Social Media Accounts.
 - b. Some Social Media Platforms include features that allow an administrator to hide comments from public view. Hiding comments is only permitted if it meets one of the following conditions:
 - i. Violates the Social Media Platform's terms of service;
 - ii. Contains information about official City business that is legally deemed confidential and should not be made public;
 - iii. Considered pornographic, obscene, or defamatory in nature, including links to inappropriate sexual content;

- iv. Openly advocates for violence or the threat of violence;
- v. Openly discriminates against others or advocates for discrimination based on race, creed, color, age, religion, gender, genetic information, gender identity, sex, pregnancy status, sexual orientation, national origin, ethnicity, disability, veteran status, or any other legally protected class;
- vi. Solicitations of commerce or marketing of private business enterprises;
- vii. Encourage or promote illegal activity;
- viii. Include information that may compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems;
- ix. Appear to violate the intellectual property or copyright of any other party;
- x. Content that is clearly off-topic or repetitive and detracts from the original City Social Media Content.

D. If photos, video, or other media are solicited from the public through a City Social Media Account to increase public interaction, all content received must be accepted and remain public unless it fails to meet the criteria stated above.

IV. CPIO Citywide Social Media Accounts (Nextdoor, Reddit, YouTube, Snapchat, and Public Engagement Platforms)

- A. Unless a business case is made and approved for a separate account, City Social Media Content posted on Nextdoor, Reddit, YouTube, Snapchat, and on other Public Engagement Platforms should be requested and coordinated through CPIO marketing consultants.
 - a. **Nextdoor** was created for neighborhoods, and posts from official agencies should be limited, targeted, and generally address issues that are specific, timely, and/or of geographic interest. That could include information concerning community policing, crime prevention, emergency preparedness, public information, and urgent alerts. A separate training is required for departments that have a business justification and need for their own account.
 - b. The City has one **Reddit** account, operated by CPIO, to coordinate posts, Ask Me Anything (AMA) forums, and monitor discussions on r/Austin because of the unique community and posting standards for the platform. To request posting to this account, please contact CPIO.
 - c. The City has an official **YouTube** channel for City-related videos, programs, and Public Service Announcements (PSAs). Departments and programs may request a “playlist” be created to feature their videos. Approval of playlists will be made by the ATXN Manager. Copies of all video content shall be stored and maintained separately by ATXN staff for the purposes of records retention.
 - d. The City has one recognized **Snapchat** account managed by CPIO. Emerging Social Media Platforms that feature temporary content will not be approved until reviewed by the City Social Media Committee.

- e. **Public Engagement Platforms** are forums specifically designed to receive public input and encourage civic participation. Use of public engagement platforms should be coordinated through the CPIO Community Engagement Division to ensure consistency with the City's community engagement standards and processes.
- B. To allow for after-hours use, access to the City's Main Facebook and Twitter accounts will be shared with the City's public safety PIOs, Aviation, Austin Energy, and Austin Water Utility. Other requests for login access will be considered on a case- by- case basis.

V. Use of Social Media by permanent Boards and Commissions and other temporary task forces and advisory bodies created by City Council (collectively, Boards) including committees created by such Boards

- A. The City of Austin recognizes the value that Social Media may offer to the City's Boards, and has developed guidelines for use of these tools in the conduct of work that supports their advisory role to the City Council.
- B. City Social Media Accounts don't meet the requirements under the Texas Open Meetings Act (TOMA) for posting notices of regular Board or Commission meetings, which should be coordinated through the City Clerk's Office. If a Board wishes to share that notice once posted, they can do so only as a complement and not a replacement of required notice.
- C. Boards wishing to create a social media account must first submit a business case and plan through the procedure described in Section I of this policy.
 - a. Business cases and plans should include consideration of how retention of the records will be paid for, how they intend to handle disposition schedules, and whether the account will be used as outreach or for public engagement.
 - b. Once a business case has been reviewed, the Board must take formal action to create the account, and follow requirements for approval and governance outlined in this policy.
- D. Due to TOMA requirements, individual members of a Board must:
 - a. Require posts made to a Board Social Media Account be managed by the respective board liaison or City staff designee and should reflect the views of the body as a whole. This will likely require an official vote to be taken by the Board.
 - b. Use the main resource established and approved by the "parent" Board.
 - c. Board Social Media Accounts should provide a link to information and documents posted on the City website in the information section of their page.
- E. Due to TOMA requirements, individual members of a Board are prohibited from:
 - a. Participating in postings or discussion threads on Social Media sites created and maintained by the group of which they are a member.
 - b. Using any Social Media Platform as a replacement for postings and notifications required to be posted to City Clerk and/or City of Austin websites.
 - c. Directing staff to post statements of personal opinion held by individual members.
 - d. Directing staff to post positions advocating for or against any ballot proposition or candidate for office.
- F. The staff liaison may post regular business of the Board to approved Social Media Accounts without formal action of the Board, provided that posted documents are also available on the

City's website. "Regular business" is defined as the standard and routine activity of any Board, and generally includes agendas, minutes, presentations, documents, and backup items created during the course of regular Board proceedings. This may also include responses or clarifications of items of fact related to the Board (dates, times, published data, etc.).

- G. Board Social Media Accounts should not be used to ask for formal feedback or public comment. Any effort to solicit community feedback or input should go through Public Engagement Platforms, coordinated through the staff liaison and CPIO. Boards may utilize Public Engagement Platforms for gathering public input and fostering public discussion related to the advisory role they have been assigned by City Council, provided that the use conforms to the policies described in this document, and that it meets the following additional requirements:
 - a. The request for input or posting of discussion items is approved in a formal action of the Board at a posted meeting.
 - b. The request for input or posting of discussion items does not relate to any solicitation that is identified as being in the "No Contact Period" by the City Purchasing Office or Contract Management.
 - c. The request for input should be pursuant to specific Council direction or resolution.

VI. Use of Social Media by employee affinity and other employee groups

- A. Employee groups wanting to create social media pages must adhere to the following requirements:
 - a. Any pages created for employee groups are not considered official City Social Media Accounts, as participating in such groups is not part of an employee's City of Austin job duties.
 - b. Social media pages for employee groups are not bound by the retention, management, or posting requirements laid out in this policy.
 - c. Employee group accounts fall under personnel policies that guide personal usage of City resources by employees outside of their job responsibilities.
- B. Any social media accounts for employee groups that could reasonably be mistaken to be City-sponsored must clearly state that it isn't an official City Social Media Account. This includes:
 - a. Posting a disclaimer on the profile page that the page is not an official social media account managed by the City of Austin and neither reflects nor adheres to City of Austin policy or standards.
 - b. Not providing City staff contacts, like City phone numbers or email addresses.
 - c. Not using the City seal in any profile materials, including the profile and background photos.