



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Community Technology & Telecommunications Commission

**FROM:** Jesse Rodriguez, Interim Program Manager Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs

**DATE:** October 13, 2021

**SUBJECT:** Recommendations for 2022 Grant for Technology Opportunities Program

### **Background**

The City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan, as adopted by [Resolution No. 20141120-074](#), includes every Austin resident having an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society, accessing and using digital and communications technology. The Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs (TARA) is the lead office for implementation of this plan. The Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) is a grant administered by the Community Technology (CT) Division of TARA directed at improving the community's ability to fully participate in the digital society to achieve the goals of the Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan.

### **Purpose and Process**

The purpose of this report is to review the significant changes coming to the 2022 cycle of the GTOPs. Each year, CT staff performs a review of the prior grant cycle in preparation for the next year of grants. For this year's annual strategic planning and review process, feedback surveys were deployed to all GTOPs applicants and reviewers. In addition, staff observations and multiple touchpoints with the chair of the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission (CTTC) were taken into account. From these data sources, recommendations were drafted into the final version of the recommendations, presented below.

### **Analysis**

There are three categories of changes being proposed for the GTOPs 2022 cycle: 1) Changes to the review and scoring process; 2) changes to the application and application process; 3) changes to contract oversight; and 4) continuous innovation and improvement plans. Together, these four changes could greatly improve service delivery and core program capacity to local Austin nonprofit groups.

### **Changes to the Review and Scoring Process**

*Recommendation 1: Transition to an Olympic-style scoring system, whereby the top and bottom scores are dropped*

Under the current GTOPs scoring system, each reviewer independently scores applications. All scores are provided to all awardees along with comments on why the reviewers scored the way they did. Naturally, different reviewers score in slightly different ways, some higher, others lower on average. Individual applicants often see a single score that is significantly lower than the others, and they often feel as if a single reviewer is taking them out of the running. This is a consistent point of feedback, not only this year, but in past years. The most requested system to alleviate this is to move to the Olympic-style scoring system, where the highest and lowest scores are dropped. We plan to test this style of scoring this year.

*Recommendation 2: Adjust the GTOPs Scoring system to a multi-phase single round of scoring, where all panelists score all applications one time, but have the opportunity to adjust scores during the scoring process.*

The change in Recommendation 1 requires significant changes to the review structure. Currently, first round panels are as small as 3 members. Dropping the high and low score would leave too few scores. Therefore, we need to have all panelists score all applications. If we were to continue the two-round scoring system, this would amount to a prohibitive increase in effort for panelists. To offset this, we recommend shifting to a one-round scoring system with multiple steps.

Step 1: Half of the panelists will score half of the applications AND be responsible for generating questions for the applicants on behalf of the whole panel.

Step 2: All generated questions are sent to the applicants for response. Responses are collected and distributed to the whole panel.

Step 3: All panelists score the remaining applications that they did not score in step 1 AND make any adjustments to prior scoring based on responses received.

Step 4: All panelists meet and discuss their scoring in a group setting, making any final adjustments as they go. Final scores are submitted at the end of this process.

### **Changes to the Application and Application Process**

*Recommendation 3: Eliminate the “Collaborative” focus area, because it caused confusion and collaboration is already a part of the scoring criteria. OR re-format the “Collaborative” questions to ensure clarity.*

The Collaborative focus area proved confusing for some applicants who were familiar with the separate “Collaborative” grant pathway tried the year before. Since collaboration is already rewarded in the existing scoring criteria, staff recommends that we eliminate the Collaborative focus area this year to avoid any confusion and to prevent any unnecessary duplication.

*Recommendation 4: Streamline the application process by adding a “grant contact” field to the Letter of Interest (LOI) and eliminating the Performance Measure Definition Tool requirement.*

Currently, only Executive Director information is asked for on the LOI. The Executive Director of the applicant organization may or may not be the best contact for day-to-day questions

regarding the grant. Including “grant contact” information on the LOI is a simple change that will offer a slight improvement in the process workflow.

**Changes to Contract Oversight**

*Recommendation 5: Transition GTOPs Core to a 2 payment model, where half of the award is made up front and the second half is conditioned on successful performance of the first half of the award.*

Under the current model, GTOPs is a reimbursement grant, where awardees incur expenses and request reimbursement monthly. This is a legacy of previous City preference to avoid unnecessary financial risk. Guidelines on pre-pay structures have eased up over the past couple of years, offering an opportunity to drastically reduce the administrative requirements of GTOPs, both for the City and for awardees. For this reason, we recommend transitioning to a 2 payment model, where half of the awarded funds are transferred at the beginning of the contract period and the second half is conditioned on the successful performance of the awardee in the first half of the contract. This would equate to up to 10 fewer financial reports needing to be submitted by awardees.

**Continuous Innovation and Improvement Plans**

*Recommendation 6: Host a focus group of concerned applicants to workshop what part of the application is most cumbersome/where duplication can be eliminated.*

One of the most common points of feedback from applicants is that the GTOPs Core application is one of the most difficult applications to complete. Staff have streamlined and improved the application every year for the past three years, yet this complaint remains. Staff recommends pulling together a focus group of prior applicants to do a walk-through of the application with an eye towards what improvements can be made.

*Recommendation 7: Carve out \$50,000 for an experimental GTOPs pathway.*

Iteration and innovation are core parts of GTOPs. As we look to be responsive to community needs, it is important to always try new things. Staff recommends reserving \$50,000 of GTOPs funding for a new service delivery, to be defined in the coming months. This funding would be drawn from the previous allocation of GTOPs Capacity (\$50,000 previously) and GTOPs Core (\$300,000 previously) in equal measure (\$25,000 from each source). While staff does not have a final idea of how this pool of funding will be utilized, we are currently ideating around how we can support low-cost internet options in the community more intentionally.

Please feel free to contact me at 512.974.7676 if you need additional information.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jesse Rodriguez, Interim Program Manager

\_\_\_\_\_  
10/13/2021  
Date

cc: Rondella Hawkins, Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs Officer