




## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Parks and Recreation Board Members

**FROM:** Kimberly A. McNeeley, M.Ed., CPRP, Director  
Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

**DATE:** April 21, 2022

**SUBJECT:** Parks and Recreation Community Engagement Operations

---

The purpose of this memorandum is to respond to recent questions regarding the Parks and Recreation Department's (Department) community engagement practices and to provide information on the current state of operations for the Communications and Engagement Unit (CEU). CEU is receiving its highest ever volume of projects while the resources available to complete those projects has remained stagnant. Community engagement projects include code-initiated projects such as, naming/renaming park facilities requests, park planning and development projects, and programming projects with expected community impact or which are likely to receive interest from the community. CEU routinely navigates complex operational realities, such as cooperation with contracted community engagement consultants and an increased emphasis on equity, involving community members who have historically been excluded from public decision-making processes.

Additionally, this memorandum seeks to inform you of the workflow which carries community input generated from the engagement process through to Department action or recommended actions.

### Recent Context

The City of Austin's current approach to community engagement began in January of 2015 when Austin City Council created the Task Force on Community Engagement to examine community engagement effectiveness, methods, and key themes, and develop recommendations to enhance community engagement in the City. Prior to that, community engagement work was handled by a variety of positions and the approach to community engagement varied significantly among departments. The recommendations released in 2016 led to the City of Austin becoming a member of the International Association of Public Participation as an anchor in best practices, developing the City of Austin Public Participation Principles to guide each department, and the creation of the Community Engagement Specialist City job title to implement the recommendations. The full set of recommendations can be viewed here: [Task Force on Community Engagement Webpage](#).

The Department embraced community engagement by:

- creating its first Community Engagement Specialist position in 2017;
- developing community engagement practices that became standards throughout the City.

The implementation of task force recommendations increased demand for community engagement activity, which quickly outpaced available staff resources. To address this, the Department prioritized funding requests for the CEU during subsequent budget planning cycles. In each case, General Fund constraints and other department budget needs took priority so the Department supplemented CEU resources with temporary staff positions.

The Department has proposed funding for additional CEU staff via a cost-neutral Capital Improvement Project (CIP) funding mechanism for the Fiscal Year 2023 budget planning cycle. Under this proposal, all funding would come from the multiple, annual Department CIP project funds.

### **Community Engagement Methodology**

The Department's community engagement methodology aligns with the City of Austin Public Participation Principles and best practices set forth by the International Association of Public Participation. The framework provides guidance for designing community engagement plans and techniques for implementing community engagement. A project begins with CEU's Community Engagement Specialist and Department project managers developing an initial engagement plan outline. In cases where the project includes a solicitation for a consultant, the scope of work may include community engagement activities. Prime contractors include their community engagement credentials or look for sub-contractors with experience in community engagement. In any case the CEU provides oversight throughout the project lifecycle.

The community engagement process is tailored to the unique requirements of each project as well as to the community that is likely to be the most impacted. Some common techniques for collecting input are community meetings, event tabling, online forums, pop-up events, small group discussions, and surveys. Feedback is collected, consolidated, and shared on the associated project webpage or report for review by the Department and the public. All project information is posted for transparency and public review.

CEU offers guidance to Department project managers and program staff on how feedback should be incorporated into project plans and designs. This guidance includes:

- Surveys should not be treated like voting contests but rather a set of identified preferences from the community;
- Project Team or program staff should articulate how data collected influenced the plan, design, or program/administrative decision;
- Data should be disaggregated and explored for key differences along key demographic data points (*i.e.*, district, income level, race/ethnicity, or others pertinent to project);
- Underrepresented community groups on surveys and similar instruments can be weighted with representative percentages to identify group differences compared to overall results;
- Feedback from underrepresented groups should include a statement of how that input was examined and included; and
- Data analysis and resulting plan or design should be taken back to the community to ask, "Did we hear you?" to complete the feedback loop.

The feedback collected through community engagement helps to prioritize the values, programs, amenities and uses that were identified as important to the impacted community. The conclusions drawn by the project team in each session are made publicly available and recapped in each subsequent engagement. Community feedback is considered alongside adopted comprehensive, strategic, and long-range plans, nationally recognized best practices, environmental impact, professional judgement of Department staff and the overall budget when determining the final product. The project goals and values that are identified through engagement are documented in the early chapters of each process, to demonstrate how the community's ideas evolved into actionable results.

For administrative or program-based initiatives, the conclusions drawn by the program staff can guide decisions in program changes, additions or deletions, or administrative process changes to be documented in a publicly accessible document (*i.e.*, correspondence, report, policy or procedure, etc.)

### **Staff Resources**

The Department currently has one full-time Community Engagement Specialist, a temporary Community Engagement Specialist and two part-time temporary Community Services Coordinators dedicated to community engagement activities. Funding for the temporary positions comes from Department vacancy savings not specifically dedicated to CEU. Turnover among these temporary positions is of particular concern due to extensive training requirements on community engagement practices and procedures. Often temp staff seek to leverage their new skills to pursue full-time employment. As a result, CEU spends a disproportionate amount of time on staff training while struggling to forge lasting relationships with community partners.

### **Consultants**

To supplement staff resources, the Department relies on contracted community engagement consultants to support projects. While the additional resources can aid outreach and engagement efforts, reliance on consultants has resulted in recurring challenges for the Department. Consultants often bid on large, multi-phased projects where community engagement is only a small part of the total project scope. Some prime consultants have community engagement experience, but often prime consultants sub-contract to smaller community engagement firms to handle outreach; resulting in limited funding for the community engagement effort and support reduced to a fixed number of quantifiable activities, such as meetings held, emails sent, flyers hung and social media posts. Approaching community engagement in this way is not in keeping with the Department's values of listening to community members, building connections, reaching people where they live and involving communities that have historically been excluded from public processes. The result is that underserved community members continue to feel that their voices are not being heard.

Consultants are typically used for large projects with increased visibility. To ensure engagement is consistent with the Department's community engagement values, CEU staff must remain involved as *de facto* project managers overseeing community engagement timelines, ensuring deliverables are met and providing regular guidance on engagement techniques, outreach methods, and language access requirements. When consultants create content for distribution, it is incumbent on CEU staff with access to City communication platforms to handle publication. In cases where consultants deliver incomplete or partially complete deliverables, it is CEU's responsibility to step in and ensure work is completed in

accordance with City policies and Department values. In cases where a consultant leaves or is removed from a project, CEU steps in to finish their work and keep the project on schedule.

## **Conclusion**

CEU is a dedicated team of professionals that provides a vital service to Austin communities. The Department has a robust engagement process even when challenged by limited resources. The Parks and Recreation Board can be an advocate for CEU and the community engagement work as it comes to understand the full complement of engagement strategies Staff intends to present on community engagement strategies at the April 25, 2022 meeting of the Parks and Recreation Board.

Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

cc: Liana Kallivoka, PhD, PE, LEED Fellow, Assistant Director  
Lucas Massie, M.Ed., CPRP, Assistant Director  
Suzanne Piper, DBA, Chief Administrative Officer  
Laura Esparza, Acting Assistant Director