



BOARD/COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Austin Travis County Food Policy Board

Recommendation Number: 20230727-1 Statement on the Proposed 2024 City of Austin Budget

The Austin-Travis County Food Policy Board advocates for a robust, resilient local food system. This recommendation is a response to the proposed 2023-2024 City of Austin budget released on July 14th, which proposes to consolidate the Office of Sustainability and Office of Resilience to the Planning Department. These moves would represent a significant loss of capacity for these offices to make equitable, innovative, informed, and uncoerced decisions and actions with community and key stakeholders, thereby jeopardizing their ability to affect positive change on the local food system, address climate change, and be responsive to disaster situations which require emergency food support.

In the past, we have advocated for sufficient resources to understand, dismantle, and remake our food system into one that is economically and racially just and puts the workers and small businesses who have been negatively impacted historically, and where impact has been exacerbated due the pandemic, at the center of the process. This includes food access as a right (the end of food insecurity). This is not easy to do. It requires time, money, and a great deal of transparency and accountability. Based on the 2022 State of the Food System report, only 0.06% of food consumed in Travis County is produced locally and 14.4% of our population is experiencing food insecurity, while 16.8 acres of farmland are lost daily and 1.24 million pounds of food are wasted annually. The wide-ranging consequences of these challenges cannot be hidden.

Since its establishment in 2011, the Office of Sustainability has proven itself capable of addressing these challenges. Their innovative work has had a tremendous impact over the years that goes well beyond planning. The Office of Sustainability creates and runs programs, coordinates among city departments and county agencies, and does on-the-groundwork in times of crisis that saves lives. The dedicated staff work hard every day to keep our diverse community, our health, our environment, small businesses, and people safe. This impact was amplified with the hiring of a Food Policy Manager in 2014, making Austin one of only a few cities with staff dedicated to the health of the local food system.

Additionally, the Offices of Sustainability and Resilience have been organized as part of the RISE group of departments (Resilience, Innovation, Sustainability, and Equity), ensuring that the city of Austin is prepared for the increasingly complex challenges facing us. The proposed restructuring will further

separate these offices, when their work and ability to work together, remains paramount - not only the outcomes they achieve in concert with each other, but also how they are working to ensure the city supports and develops equitable municipal structures. Furthermore, the outputs and metrics of these offices could create unnecessary misalignment with strategies and metrics of the planning department, when collaboration with the planning department would be more prudent.

Highlights of Recent Office of Sustainability Work

- 2012: Working with Austin Resource Recovery, Watershed Protection, Public Works, and Austin Transportation, the Office of Sustainability launched the Bright Green Future Grants to award funds to Austin-area schools for sustainability projects.
- 2015: Austin Community Climate Plan, the first climate plan for the city, was adopted in June 2015
- 2016: Sustainability Office launches the Good Food Purchasing Pilot program, coordinating the adoption of this values-based institutional purchasing framework in partnership with AISD, University of Texas, and the Austin Convention Center.
- 2018: Coordination among multiple departments led to the approval of Urban Roots' expansion to the Winnebago property, an effort over five years in the making that was shepherded by the City's Food Policy Manager and involved countless other staff from various departments.
- 2019: Charitable Food Organization permitting process was reconfigured with process improvements and the permitting fee was removed to lower institutional barriers to charitable feeding across the city. This work was done in partnership with Austin Public Health and many community partners.
- 2020: The Sustainability Office helped launch the Eating Apart Together initiative, which served more than a million meals to people experiencing homelessness.
- 2020: During COVID-19, the Office of Sustainability worked with local restaurants Easy Tiger, Henbit-Emmer and Rye, and Good Work Austin to produce over one million caregiver meals for families while supporting employment for restaurant staff.
- 2021: During Winter Storm Uri, the City Food Team took the lead on citywide emergency food access, including coordination of 75 partner organizations and distribution of 170,000 meals to community members impacted by the storm.
- 2021: The Austin Climate Equity Plan was adopted, which includes cross-cutting goals and strategies for the food system to reduce impact on the climate in a way that focuses on health, equity, and access.
- 2020-2021: The City of Austin awarded \$23 million in Business Relief Grants to 1,052 businesses. 41% of the awardees were food businesses.
- 2020-2021: To increase food access during COVID-19, the City of Austin allocated \$9.6 million with Travis County contributing an additional \$1.7 million.
- 2020-2023: Food Justice Mini Grants launched, awarding \$75,000 annually in grants to those leading transformative change in Austin's food system. The grants support community-driven solutions led by people most negatively impacted by the food system. These Food Justice Mini Grants are intended to support communities in their efforts to grow, sell, and eat healthy food.
- 2023: Disaster Food and Drinking Water Access Appendix added to city's Emergency Operations Plan

Environmental sustainability, resilience, and food system work require coordination with departments across the City, and more and more so with Travis County. This budget proposal would inhibit their ability to work fully with other departments without additional layers of approvals and bureaucracy

encumbering their leadership, coordination, and implementation. Similar to many other departments such as Austin Public Health, the Sustainability Office contains planning functions within, which enable it to implement programs as listed above, and should not be measured against the Planning Department's focus on city and neighborhood plans.

Our city's leadership and flexibility are critical in times of crisis, when rapid responses are needed to ensure the safety of our community. As noted in the list of highlights above, the Office of Sustainability does this vital work in times of crisis. The Office of Sustainability works directly with Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) and other departments in emergency situations. This work over the last two years has led to the creation of a Disaster Food and Water Appendix as a supplement to the city's Emergency Operations Plan. The work in this area engages City departments and key disaster food and water partners, while also building upon the current organization structure within the EOC to coordinate disaster food and water response.

The Resilience Office, while much newer, has already achieved key outcomes by launching six pilot community resilience sites that are city-owned and operated. To start, they serve as information hubs for pre-disaster planning and can distribute information for post-disaster relief. This work has been done with coordination by staff at those sites and with guidance from a Community Advisory Committee. They have launched their first Resilience Mini Grants to strengthen community resources.

The City of Austin is considered an international leader in sustainability, and the proposed consolidation sends a message that the city's focus on these critical topics is not a priority. While relatively small in terms of staffing, these departments have achieved significant work across the city, and regularly receive recognition at the highest level for this work.

Awards Received for Sustainability Work

- February 2013: The Environmental Protection Agency and its non-profit partners, the Climate Registry, the Association of Climate Change Officers, and the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, recognized Austin with the 2013 Climate Leadership Award. Austin was the first city to receive a Leadership Award for our response to climate change.
- April 2014: Austin received certification as a 4-STAR community (out of a possible 5 stars). The STAR Community Rating System is the nation's first voluntary, self-reporting framework for evaluating, quantifying, and improving the livability and sustainability of U.S. communities.
- October 2017: Austin's Healthy Food Access Initiative gains international recognition with a Special Mention Award from the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact in the Social and Economic Equity category. The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact was developed through the C40 Food Systems Network to promote food security and sustainable food systems around the world.
- January 2019: Bloomberg Philanthropies selected Austin as a winning city because of our innovative and ambitious climate action plans to reduce air pollution and city-wide emissions with specific projects aimed at reforming transit and building sectors.

Currently, the Food Team in the Office of Sustainability is in the midst of the food system planning process, working to develop our region's first municipal food plan in partnership with community and local organizations. This work, modeled on the Austin Climate Equity Plan, inherently requires interdepartmental work in planning and more so in implementation. The Austin-Travis County Food

Policy Board advised on the structure and process for the community involvement, and one key consideration was establishing structures that could persist into the implementation phase, working in concert with the Office of Sustainability and other city and county departments to ensure the vision and goals of the plan will be fulfilled.

We strongly recommend that the Offices of Sustainability and Resilience maintain their autonomy and placements within Management Services, reporting to an Assistant City Manager, led by a Chief Sustainability Officer and a Chief Resilience Officer at the executive level.

Date of Approval: July 27th, 2023

Record of the vote: 5 in favor, none opposed, 2 abstained.

For: Lisa Barden, Joi Chevalier, Kacey Hanson, Larry Franklin, Karen Magid

Abstentions: Andrea Abel, Rosamaria Murillo

Off Dais: None

Absences: Mark Bethell, Sari Vatske

Attest:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edwin Martinez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

City of Austin, Office of Sustainability, Food Policy Manager/ ATCFPB Staff Liaison