



## Open Austin Recommendations for the Task Force on Community Engagement

Open Austin is a volunteer citizen brigade advocating for open government, open data, and civic application development since 2009. Open Austin is an official brigade affiliated with the nonprofit Code for America which believes government can work for the people, by the people in the 21st century. As a part of a national movement we design & build open source technology and organize a network of people dedicated to making government services simple, effective, and easy to use.

Our membership recognizes the Task Force's mission to:

- Provide a report to Council with a description of
  - existing City community engagement tools,
  - innovative techniques and technologies used across the country;
  - identification of best practices;
  - and recommendations for enhancing existing resources, including fiscal implications.

Over the past five years, Code for America has worked with local governments across the country and developed a number of tools designed to increase participation and engagement. We have seen that there are five key elements of effective 21st century community engagement.

1. *Reach*: Governments need to define the constituency they are trying to reach, with an emphasis on identifying those whose voices aren't already represented.
2. *Information*: Relevant information should be easy to find and understand, spoken in a clear, simple, and authentic voice.
3. *Channels*: A diversity of engagement channels should be used, both online and offline, that meet people where they are.
4. *Productive Actions*: Identify clear, concrete and meaningful actions that the community can take to reach their desired outcomes.
5. *Feedback Loops*: An engagement process isn't complete until the community has been followed up with and shown how their actions have impacted positive outcomes.

With these themes in mind, and noting the importance of technology and open governance in the mission of this Task Force's mission, Open Austin makes the following recommendations:

## **1. Improve access to and completeness of public-meeting information.**

- General Council, Council committee and commission proceedings should be aggressively transparent in the spirit of the Texas Open Meetings Act and because citizens should not have to be experts to participate.
- Current City Council agendas are not easily navigable nor searchable. Commission and committee agendas are worse, typically posted as PDF documents in disparate places.
- The underlying data for agendas, minutes, and backup should be released in an open data format – and not just locked up in a website or app. This would allow data to be merged with other information available to the public, such as 3-1-1 service calls or council district overlays.
- The current agenda management system, SIRE, is out of date. Its vendor Hyland Software has discontinued the software and no longer supports it.
- **Recommendation:**
  - Initiate procurement of modern legislative tracking and agenda management software system that would support the publication of the underlying meeting details, decisions, and supporting documents data in an open data format.
  - Include community stakeholders in process to identify needs and features.
  - Research and evaluate best practices from other cities, such as open-source tools like [Councilmatic](#). City procurement team should seek resources and requirements in order to implement such a system in the City of Austin.

## **2. Create an issue tracking system for website and digital properties to encourage feedback and productive action in the form of site improvement.**

- The city has an issue tracking system (3-1-1) for citizens to report broken traffic lights and loose animals. There should be a system for citizens to report broken web links, bugs on the website, errors in data formatting in open data datasets, requests for missing datasets, etc.

- The system should allow the City to solicit feedback on its digital properties in a transparent manner so that citizens are aware that their content recommendations or bug reports are being seen and responded to.
- **Recommendation:**
  - Create a regularly updated public inventory of websites and digital services to understand the scope of an issue tracking system.
  - Initiate a process to discover, design, or procure a centralized issue tracking system for [austintexas.gov](http://austintexas.gov) & [data.austintexas.gov](http://data.austintexas.gov) and other digital properties.

### **3. Open Source City of Austin website content and services to encourage community contributions.**

- When the City of Austin chose to build their website in 2009 using an open source CMS system, it was seen as a victory in the community. Advantages to open source technologies are well known.
- In addition to data, the code used to create government websites, portals, tools and other online resources can provide benefits as valuable open data itself. Governments should employ open source solutions whenever possible to enable sharing and make the most out of these benefits.
- Currently, tools like Github.com make it easy to share code and web content. The advantages to publically sharing code and content is that citizen volunteers can recommend and contribute updates when sections of a website have software bugs or content errors.
  - The Chief Data Officer of the City of Chicago, Tom Schenk estimates that they've received [150 hours](#) of high-skilled volunteer time contributed to the city on their open source projects.
- The City of Austin pays for an enterprise Github.com license in order to have some projects hidden from public view. This tool could be further utilized to include community feedback by taking these projects from private to public when appropriate.
  - See examples of open projects that [Chicago](#), [Philadelphia](#), and [New York](#) share via Github.com.
- **Recommendation:**
  - Research best practices from cities that have open-sourced code projects and web content available online.
  - Adopt practices that make underlying content, code and data available for suggestions and improvement via tools like Github.com.

### **4. Create a policy for IT procurement & app releases that requires an open data plan.**

- Many of the legacy enterprise systems have major limitations accessing the public information they hold, impeding the ability to publish this information on the open data portal.
- The adoption of City apps is exciting and can be a boon to citizen needs, but apps alone are not sufficient to meet open government and open data objectives if underlying public data is sent to a 3rd party to power an app but is not released in a machine readable format to the public.
- As part of the Open Data 2.0 initiative, the city provides an inventory of legacy systems that have limited or insufficient data in an open and machine-readable format, and recommendations to facilitate access.
- **Recommendations:**
  - Implement a policy for the procurement on IT systems, apps and digital services that requires the procuring department to create an open data plan that specifies how and when public information will be provided to the public-at-large in a raw, machine readable format.

## **5. Survey data collected by, or on the request of the City should be “Open by Default.”**

- When the City (or a 3rd party paid by the City) conducts a survey gathering data from citizens, the deliverable is often a PDF report. However, there is arguably more value in the data than the report that is produced.
- Demographic questions provide insights into the perspectives and needs held by different sub-groups in Austin. They also allow researchers to determine whether the study has reached the target audience.
- **Recommendations:**
  - Survey data should be made publicly accessible in appropriate formats including raw data, data maps, questionnaires, details about survey methodology.
  - Survey data should include demographic questions, but should not capture any personally identifiable information and preserve the anonymity of individual respondents.

### **More resources:**

- [Code for America’s Engagement Practice Area](#)
- [Sunlight Foundation’s Open Data Policy Guidelines](#)

### **Contact:**

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