

Austin, TX

Award-winning citizen collaboration



Community engagement has always been a top priority for the City of Austin, TX. It supports their vision to become the most livable community in the country as well as the best-managed city in the country. Austin is already achieving impressive results in these areas. Their citizen satisfaction ratings are higher than the national average and they were recently recognized as having one of the best job markets in America by Forbes Magazine.

To continue to grow and prosper, the City of Austin keeps community engagement and citizen empowerment at the forefront of their initiatives. Recently, Austin's Communications and Public Information Department revolutionized the City's citizen engagement strategy by adding a new way to gather feedback from their residents online using the SpeakUpSM application included in Granicus' Citizen Participation Suite. The tools are already helping Austin improve the quality of its public services by actively involving over 3,313 citizens in government planning and decision-making process online.

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- Larry Schooler, Community Engagement Consultant,
City of Austin, TX

Success Highlights

- Engaging 3,313+ citizens online
- Generating 1024+ ideas to improve governance
- 65+ community ideas have been put into action
- 26 Ideas have already been completed
- Fully integrated civic environment, reaching 10,000+ citizens
- 2011 GovFresh Award Winner for Citizen Collaboration

Fast Facts

Agency Type: City

Population: 656,562

Solution:

Granicus Platform

Citizen Participation Suite

Active Since: 2011

To continuously improve the quality of life for “Austinites,” the City realized they needed to make significant updates to its community engagement strategy. Their current process was undefined and lacked uniformity across 30 departments. Also, they wanted to expand public participation channels beyond just in-person hearings, email, and phone.

“Our goal was to create a more convenient and meaningful way for the public to participate in City government,” said Larry Schooler, Community Engagement Consultant for the City of Austin. “We also wanted to be able to solicit feedback from our entire community — not just those who could attend in-person meetings.”

Traditionally, the City hosts in-person community hearings to gather public input on policy and programs. These face-to-face interactions are extremely valuable, however, only small segment of their population would show up. “We needed to make the civic engagement process more accessible to people who couldn’t or wouldn’t get involved before,” said Doug Matthews, Chief Communications Director for the City of Austin. “Empowering citizens with an easier way to voice their opinions and ideas through the web became a top priority,” added Matthews.

After testing various systems, the City found the flexibility and usability of the SpeakUp platform to be better than the rest. They seized the opportunity to design a system that met their exact specifications. “We wanted to build a user-centric and intuitive online forum that complemented our traditional participation methods,” said Matthews. “SpeakUp gave us more control over our civic engagement process. We are able to create idea forums on the fly. Additionally we can easily manage and measure citizen engagement from a central dashboard,” he added. Using this platform, the City designed

and launched a forum called SpeakUpAustin! in the summer of 2011.

“SpeakUpAustin! allows us to facilitate powerful two-way public participation that’s either initiated by the City or by citizens,” said Schooler.



Citizens can quickly submit ideas to help the City improve services or public policy. For instance, one resident had the idea to install a bike share hub. Because Austin has a very active biking community, this idea quickly became one of the highest rated in the forum. Since then, the Public Works Department is in the midst of building a plan to implement a bike share program. “The ideas we generate are catalysts for action,” said Schooler. “We now have a tool to help us learn about the topics that matter most to our citizens. We also have a way to quickly prioritize ideas and put productive plans into action. All of this enables us to actually show our residents that we’re responsive,” Schooler added.

Discussion forums are also frequently used by the City to solicit feedback on timely policy or service initiatives. Recently, City staff was asked by City Council to gather community input to develop a new plastic bag ordinance. They created a discussion forum to encourage the public to provide feedback on targeted topics such as timeline, enforcement, and unintended consequences. They received more than 150 responses from citizens which helped them stipulate an action plan.

“The conversation we started helped our Solid Waste Advisory Committee start to draft an ordinance that took community concerns, priorities, and suggestions into consideration,” said Schooler.

Since launching SpeakUpAustin!, productive two-way community engagement has surged. The City has engaged over 3,313 citizens, generated 1024 ideas, put 65 ideas into action and fully implemented 26 of them. Also, by fully integrating their online forum with traditional civic engagement channels, they have been able to attract over 10,000 citizens to participate in City Planning efforts. Overall, the forum serves as a critical link between active citizens and City government.

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vote



Improve last-mile and recreational transit by installing bike share hubs throughout the urban core

A managed bike share system should be an integral part of the transit discussion. For distances of less than one-mile, these are cost-effective systems of getting urban-Austinites and visitors where they want to get to.

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