

## **City of San Antonio Public Participation**

### *Summary of Recommendations*

Engaged residents are fundamental to the health of City government. The successful development of policy and implementation of City programs depends on meaningful civic engagement, which engenders trust and accountability between the community and the government that serves it. The City of San Antonio offers many opportunities for residents to provide input on City policies, programs and initiatives. This document summarizes research and recommendations for City departments developing any campaign for which input is sought from stakeholders or the general public.

### **BACKGROUND**

In February 2018, City Councilwoman Ana Sandoval filed a Council Consideration Request to develop principles and standards for each City campaign to follow in order to create consistency, clear expectations and ample opportunity for the public to provide input prior to Council action.

The City's Government & Public Affairs Department (GPA), which oversees communications and City-wide campaigns on behalf of the organization, led the effort to respond to the CCR through the following scope of work:

1. Assessing current public participation techniques utilized by departments
2. Convening a cross-departmental working group to establish guiding principles
3. Researching best practices
4. Reviewing and making recommendations to improve the Citizens to be Heard process
5. Developing a tool for updating the community on specific issues

### **What is public participation?**

For the purpose of the principles and standards addressed in this directive, the City defines public participation as "any process that obtains and considers public input in a decision prior to taking action." Public participation is a two-way communication with the goal of engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process. Public participation campaigns differ from public awareness and education campaigns, which do not include the opportunity for the public to influence the decision or outcome of a policy, program or action. However, both campaign types utilize various marketing and public relations tactics to promote and support the effort, such as print advertising, social media and news releases.

### **ASSESSMENT**

During the assessment phase, GPA surveyed Public Information Officers from departments that had engaged in public participation efforts within the past two years. Out of the 14 City departments responding, 23 campaigns were reported.

Of those campaigns:

- 2 of the campaigns were to share information with stakeholders or the general public (public relations/education campaigns) and do not meet the definition of public participation for the purposes of these principles and standards.
  - ‘Dirty Diapers’ / SWMD
  - ‘Employment Workshops’ / HR
  
- 5 of the campaigns sought input from targeted stakeholders, not the general public.
  - ‘Delegate Agency Input Sessions’ / DHS
  - ‘Cart Downsize Campaign’ / SWMD
  - ‘King William/Lavaca Parking Program’ / CCDO
  - ‘SARA Gate 4 Replacement’ / CCDO
  - ‘Opportunity Zones Developer Survey’ / CCDO
  
- 16 of the campaigns were to share information with and seek input from the general public.
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Neighborhood Improvements Bond Program RFI’ / NHSD</li> <li>○ ‘IT Roadmap’ / SAPL</li> <li>○ ‘Riverwalk Landscaping Surveys’ / CCDO</li> <li>○ ‘Riverbarge Design’ / CCDO</li> <li>○ ‘Riverbarge Beta Test Ride’ / CCDO</li> <li>○ ‘Alameda Theater Revitalization’ / CCDO</li> <li>○ ‘SA Tomorrow Regional Plans’ / Planning</li> <li>○ ‘Chapter 5 Animal Ordinance Revisions’ / ACS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Alamodome Tell Us What You Think’ / CSF</li> <li>○ ‘SASpeakUp’ / GPA</li> <li>○ ‘Rideshare Roundtables’ / GPA, SAPD</li> <li>○ ‘Pothole Patrol’ / TCI</li> <li>○ ‘Tobacco 21’ / Health</li> <li>○ ‘Short-Term Rentals’ / DSD</li> <li>○ ‘Mobile Living Parks’ / DSD</li> <li>○ ‘System Plan’ / Parks</li> </ul>
--	---

Of the 21 campaigns seeking input, the departments conducting the process primarily used public meetings (5), opinion surveys (6) or both (10) to receive input.

### Meeting Participation

Public meeting participation ranged from 40 attendees over 1 meeting (Tobacco 21) to 525 attendees over 11 meetings (SA Tomorrow Regional Plans).

### Survey Participation

In contrast, surveys seeking input from the general public received a range of responses, from 25 over three days (Riverwalk Landscaping Quarterly Survey) up to 6,082 over 8 weeks (FY2018 SASpeakUp).

12 of the 16 surveys were distributed to the general public. Of those:

- 10 were available in both English and Spanish
- 11 were available online
- 5 were printed and available at City facilities
- 10 were administered in-person either at community events, public meetings or through blockwalking
- None were given by phone or direct mail

### Marketing Tactics

Of the 16 campaigns seeking input from the general public:

- All 16 utilized **email** to inform residents of the input opportunity
- 6 campaigns had a presence at **existing community events**

- 6 sent notifications through **Nextdoor** to reach targeted districts
- 4 placed **public notices** in the newspaper
- 4 utilized the City’s **COSAGOV Texts** program to send SMS messages
- 6 utilized **print advertising** and 6 utilized **digital advertising** (4 used both)
- 8 used **paid social media** advertising; 10 used **organic non-paid social media** posts
- 6 had a **campaign-specific website**; 2 had a **campaign-specific social media** page
- 3 utilized **direct mail**
- 1 utilized **billboards**
- 8 pitched the input opportunity to **local media**

**Findings**

The results of the interdepartmental survey demonstrate that while campaigns have the same objective offering San Antonio residents the opportunity to provide input on various City initiatives, there are varying activities utilized in an attempt to achieve this mission. Additionally, City departments are not fully utilizing the capabilities of the City’s existing communications infrastructure.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

GPA convened a cross-departmental working group in March 2018 to assist in the development of guiding principles for the City’s various public participation campaigns. The following departments comprised the working group: Government and Public Affairs, Information & Technology Services, Equity and Inclusion, Innovation, City Manager’s Office, Parks & Recreation, Metro Health, City Attorney’s Office, 311 and Neighborhood & Housing Services.

The group recommends all City of San Antonio public participation opportunities aim to achieve these principles:

**TRANSPARENT AND INCLUSIVE**

*All public input received, including differing viewpoints, is reflected and appropriately considered in the decision-making process to improve all functions of City government and its programs, policies and ordinances.*

**TIMELY AND ACCESSIBLE**

*Public input is sought well ahead of key decisions, engaging the public proactively. Anyone who wants to participate in the process can provide input.*

**RESPONSIVE AND CONTINUOUS**

*Outcomes and new opportunities are communicated to all who participate. Every input provided by the public is another step toward a more engaged community and sustained participation.*

These guiding principles serve as the foundation for the following recommendations and minimum standards.

**RECOMMENDED MINIMUM STANDARDS**

With assistance from the Office of Innovation, GPA explored best practices from other cities and researched ways to improve cohesiveness and communication flow to and from the public. Best

practices emphasized established campaign timelines, transparency of responses received and the use of nontraditional meetings and presence at community events as the keys to input-gathering.

As a result of this research and application of the guiding principles, the working group developed these recommendations for City departments to follow when planning and executing a public participation campaign:

- 1. All City department public participation campaigns should be branded SASpeakUp going forward, barring any special circumstances.** (e.g. *SASpeakUp on the FY2019 Budget; SASpeakUp on the Smoking Age; SASpeakUp about Potholes in Your Neighborhood*)
  - In just two years, brand recognition for SASpeakUp has increased significantly. In 2016, 23% of San Antonio residents who were surveyed as part of the City's Community-wide survey said they felt they had an opportunity to participate in the City's annual budget process. This year, when asked whether they had the opportunity to participate in the City's budget process *through SASpeakUp*, the number increased to 37%. GPA recommends expanding the branding to cover all input opportunities.
  - GPA and ITSD are developing a one-stop SASpeakUp resource for all public meetings and input opportunities on the City's website. By hosting all City surveys in one place, residents can view their opportunities to speak up on City issues at any time and provide feedback 24/7.
- 2. Public meetings should serve as a supplement to any input opportunity, not as the foundation for public participation.**
  - During the assessment phase, GPA found that the most-attended public meeting effort (525 attendees over 11 meetings) solicited less than 10% of responses received through the most successful survey campaign (6,082 over one survey). To effectively engage new and different participants in our input processes, the City must bring the opportunities to the residents, not expect them to come to us.
- 3. A clear timeline should be established for each opportunity, including a two-week minimum input period. Results of the campaign should be reported in the standardized format and provided prior to any City Council briefing or action at the committee or meeting level.**
  - Timely input allows staff and City Council ample opportunity to consider the input prior to recommending and/or approving policies and programs.
  - GPA recommends a standardized public participation report to facilitate clear understanding of the results.
- 4. Each campaign should utilize each of the City's existing communications resources, barring any special circumstances.**
  - The following outlets are managed by GPA and free for City departments to utilize as appropriate: COSAGOV Texts, Nextdoor, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, on-hold messaging, City calendar, front page of sanantonio.gov and news releases. Additionally, the City's Volunteer Program maintains a database of more than 10,000 volunteers to assist with various City events and programs.
- 5. All surveys and associated materials must be printed and available online, made available in English and Spanish and ask (optional) demographic questions to ensure representativeness.**
  - GPA recommends that all public input, including participation at public meetings, capture Age, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Council District (or Street Address) and Contact Information (Email).
  - Race and Ethnicity categories correspond with the original 2020 Census recommendations, which provide a more comprehensive selection for representation.

6. **All contact information gathered throughout the campaign should be added to the City's central database and used to communicate campaign outcomes and new input opportunities.**
  - Participants should expect to receive the results of any campaign to which they have provided input. For example, SASpeakUp respondents received an email the day before the City Council Budget Goal Setting Session that included a link to the livestream.

At a minimum, each department should adhere to these standards to ensure consistency across the organization.

Additional recommendations for review and development:

- *Customer relationship management (CRM) software:* GPA is researching options for City-wide email communications to San Antonio residents, as well as functionality with sanantonio.gov and the forthcoming SASpeakUp web portal to provide opt-in availability for updates on various City initiatives and input opportunities.
- *Citizens to be Heard:* Citizens to be Heard is not required by law; however, GPA and ITSD are exploring options for an online video portal where residents can record messages for submission from the comfort of their own home, at a senior center or public library. A name change is recommended to be more inclusive, as not all San Antonio residents are citizens and each has the right to participate.

## REPORTING DATA

At the close of every public participation campaign, whether input is gathered in-person at public meetings or through a survey, a campaign results report will be required from every department prior to any presentation or action at the City Council committee or full meeting level.

The report provides:

### For surveys-

- Number of responses
- Length survey was open
- Where survey was made available (online, in-person, phone)
- Languages offered
- Demographics reported
- Council Districts represented
- Breakdown of responses for each question

Additionally, all input obtained through the survey that is relevant to the focus of the public participation campaign must be reflected in the report. Content may be edited for brevity and appropriate language for presentation as long as the integrity of the comment is preserved.

### For public meetings-

- Number of attendees
- Location held, including Council District
- Day of the week and time held

- Whether Spanish translation was offered
- Advertising methods

The purpose of this standardized report is to provide a consistent mechanism for vetting, reviewing and adjusting campaign techniques and tactics as necessary. During the assessment period of the City's various campaigns, GPA noted that the level of success for surveys often aligned with the amount of time the survey was open, number of questions asked and marketing methods utilized. Public meetings showed larger turnout overall when partnered with existing events or hosted in more than one district.

## **CITIZENS TO BE HEARD**

Currently, a Citizens to be Heard session is held on Wednesdays at 6 p.m. in City Council Chambers following the City Council's Work (B) Session. Any person wishing to address the Council on any topic related to City business must register with the City Clerk. Online registration is available from 8 a.m.-6 p.m. the day of, and speakers are called upon in the order that they have registered. Following the session, a summary of the comments received is distributed to the Council offices and the relevant departments. Follow-up with the individuals who provided comments is at the discretion of the relevant departments.

GPA recommends the following improvements to ensure that residents feel their opinions are being heard and considered:

- 1. Participants who sign up for Citizens to be Heard will be provided with an explanation of how CTBH works and will be asked to provide contact information (email and telephone) so that the relevant departments and/or Council office may follow up with them, when appropriate.**
- 2. A written response, barring special exceptions, will be provided by the relevant department.**
- 3. A record of the comments and responses will be created from each Citizens to be Heard session and redistributed to the Council and the participants.**
- 4. Citizens to be Heard should be renamed to foster inclusiveness. (Option: 'SASpeakUp Session')**

## **CONCLUSION**

By utilizing the established guiding principles and following the minimum standards outlined for campaign implementation, the envisioned outcomes will improve the public's trust in City government, increase community access and participation in City programs and initiatives, create greater acceptance around new policies and increase confidence of the public and City Council in the community's opportunity to be heard. As it is the role of City government to connect residents with the services it provides, all City policies, programs and initiatives will be strengthened through meaningful civic engagement and participation by those who will be impacted.