



2019 TLG Innovation Showcase Applicant

Expanding Transparency without Expanding the Budget

City of Austin, Texas

#Relentless Creativity

Population: 947,890

Innovation

Criteria:

- Initiative fundamentally changed a process, product or service (fundamental)

OR

- Initiative builds upon existing knowledge to improve a product, process or service (incremental)
- The initiative substantially stretched the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.

Describe Your Innovation

(When and how did this innovation get started? Do also detail how the program or policy innovative, how it has changed previous processes, products, or services, and how it has substantially stretched or improved the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.)

Beginning in 2015, Austin City Council passed a series of transparency measures to increase reporting requirements for candidates, officeholders, political committees, and lobbyists, and to open transparency data to Austin residents. The Council directed the City Clerk's Office to implement the new measures.

With no additional funding or staff and tight deadlines, the Clerk's Office drew on existing resources, the technical skills of its staff, and a tremendous amount of innovation and creativity to develop a series of forms, tools, and websites that together supported and increased transparency, while also streamlining and automating many aspects of the process. Over the course of two years, the Clerk's Office created fillable PDFs to comply with the City's campaign finance and lobbyist activity reporting requirements, developed internal applications to extract, validate, transform, and upload report data, published the data to the City's Open Data Portal, and created public web searches for Austin residents to easily navigate the data. Additionally, the Clerk's Office developed a series of training videos, available on YouTube, to assist filers with the complex filing requirements, and conducted in-person training sessions on a regular basis.

Collaboration

Criteria:

- Initiative demonstrated engaging stakeholders both internal and external.
- Initiative demonstrated high performance teaming, breaking down internal silos.
- Strategic partnerships and or community networks were developed as a result of the initiative

In less than 200 words, what individuals or groups are considered the primary initiators of your program? How does the innovation engage stakeholders or demonstrate high performance teaming? What strategic partnerships and/or community networks, if any, were developed?

The new transparency requirements were drafted through a partnership with Austin residents and City Council Members. To best develop the new processes associated with the requirements, the City Clerk's Office partnered with the Law Department, city staff, and other stakeholders. Working with the Law Department was critical in understanding the new legal requirements and allowed the City Clerk's Office to translate those requirements into clear business objectives. With those objectives in mind, the City Clerk's Office developed policies, roles, processes, and internal tools and held weekly team meetings to develop the new requirements into functioning processes. To assist filers with the new campaign finance and lobbyist requirements, the Clerk's Office held a number of in-person trainings, created a series of written instruction guides, and generated video tutorials that explained the new processes. The Clerk's Office also met with City staff in other City departments to review the new requirements that specifically applied to them. Throughout both projects, the Clerk's Office solicited feedback and suggestions from filers to continually improve the processes.

If a private consultant was used please describe in detail their involvement, identify the consultant and/or firm and provide contact information. Maintain a 100 word maximum.

No consultations were used for this project. The project was completed entirely using internal resources.

Significance

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses an area of concern for the majority of local government organizations.
- Initiative can serve as a model and replicated in other jurisdictions.

Please describe the extent to which you believe your program or policy initiative is potentially replicable within other jurisdictions and why? To your knowledge, have any other jurisdictions or organizations established programs or implemented policies modeled specifically on this project? Please also provide verification of the replication.

Elections and lobbyists impact municipalities across the country, and there is a growing desire from the public for government transparency and access to open data. Additionally, municipal governments often face limited resources, statutory mandates, and lack the funding for expensive software solutions to translate their processes into a digital format. The processes and systems the City Clerk's Office developed offer a unique solution that could be replicated and also demonstrate to other municipalities that face similar challenges of limited resources and

staff, but a growing desire for increase public trust and transparency. For this project, the City Clerk's Office relied on technologies commonly used in government, including Adobe LiveCycle, Microsoft Access, and ColdFusion.

Effectiveness

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses a community or organization need.
- Initiative has achieved tangible results.
- Initiative improved the organizational culture or the traditional approach to problem solving.
- Initiative has received recognition for its achievements, i.e. independent evaluation, national recognition, local press, etc.

Please describe the most significant obstacle(s) encountered thus far by your program. How have they been dealt with? Which ones remain?

The most significant obstacle was the volume of reports (average 1,400 annually) and lack of additional funding for resources and staff that were needed to develop and manage the new business processes into the City Clerk's Office while still administering existing processes and a dense workload. The Clerk's Office tackled this challenge by developing tools to automate processes and save staff time while administering the new processes. For example, the municipal code required reports to be reviewed for completeness, but with such a high volume of reports, it would not be feasible for staff to verify reports manually.

This obstacle was addressed by developing validation tools to automate the process of reviewing reports to determine if the report passed all of the facial compliance requirements. This allowed the compliance review to be streamlined and completed within a matter of minutes in a consistent manner, rather than the hours it would have taken for staff to review the reports manually.

One obstacle that remains is the constant changing in the individuals required to submit the filings, which impacts the success of the program and requires constant training from the City Clerk's Office.

What outcomes did this program or policy have? Could you share one or two objective measures that demonstrate these outcomes? Ultimately, how did you measure the change based on the intervention, and why do you believe in the credibility of this assessment?

Once the new regulations went into effect, the City Clerk's Office experienced a rise in both transparent reports and lobbyist registrations. In the last year (August 2017 to August 2018) the City Clerk's Office received 219 campaign finance reports and data files and 548 lobbyist reports and 127 lobbyist registrations. In comparison, the City Clerk's Office received 177 campaign finance reports and 337 lobbyist reports in 2015, before the new measures went into effect. The high rise in reports and registrations indicates a rise in transparency for City of Austin activities for the public to review and analyze.

In addition to the rise in reporting and registrations, the Clerk's Office has seen a high engagement from the public in both campaign finance and lobbyist reports. Since the new transparency measures went into effect in 2016, the public has viewed the reports 112,836 times through the City of Austin website. Data associated with the reports have been posted to the City of Austin's Data Portal and the datasets have been viewed 11,979 times and downloaded 13,528 times since publication. High engagement with the reports and data illustrate that the new

processes have helped fulfilled the goal of the transparency measures to improve public trust and open data to Austin residents.

Has the program received any press or other media coverage to date? If yes, please list the sources and briefly describe relevant coverage.

When both the transparency regulations for campaign finance and lobbyist were first being discussed and debated by Austin City Council, the local newspapers and transparency groups covered the new regulations of both campaign finance and lobbyists as seen in these articles:

Pool proposes changes to rules for lobbyists (<https://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2015/08/pool-proposes-changes-rules-lobbyists/>)

How one attorney made fixing Austin's lobbying law his personal crusade (<http://cityhall.blog.statesman.com/2015/08/25/how-one-attorney-made-fixing-austins-lobbying-law-his-personal-crusade/>)

Austin Officials Considering Overhaul of Lobbyist Rules (<https://www.mystatesman.com/news/local/austin-officials-considering-overhaul-lobbyist-rules/KPHhG4a2kuDrmWEsNu79oN/>)

Austin City Council to call for online campaign finance database (<https://www.mystatesman.com/news/local/austin-city-council-call-for-online-campaign-finance-database/UUTjsPWxeWu1w0YIZNvmXO/>)

After a campaign finance filing deadline, local Austin newspapers have commonly reported on the totals of candidates and officeholders total money spent and raised. When controversial topics are being discussed at City Hall, local newspapers will commonly reference lobbyist registrations and their client lists in their news stories. These newspapers include the Austin Monitor, Austin American Statesman, and Austin Chronicle. Here are a few examples of local newspapers using transparency reports and data in their articles:

What do clients pay to sway Austin City Council? Lobbyists won't say. (<https://www.mystatesman.com/news/local/govt-politics/what-clients-pay-sway-austin-city-council-lobbyists-won-say/86HdPlckYaa6Qbl26oY7WP/>)

MLS has had an official lobbyist in Austin since at least Austin 7, 2017 (<https://www.massivereport.com/2017/12/5/16738350/mls-has-had-an-official-lobbyist-in-austin-since-at-least-august-7-2017-columbus-crew-sc-precourt>)

Campaign finance reports show who's in the money (<https://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2016/10/campaign-finance-reports-show-whos-money/>)

Council Candidates' Campaign Finance Reports (<https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2016-07-22/council-candidates-campaign-finance-reports/>)

In addition to local reporting, the Clerk's Office presented on the implementation of the new campaign finance regulations at the Open Government Summit in Paris, France in December of 2016 and the Texas Municipal League in Austin, Texas in October of 2016. The lobbyist system was awarded the International Institute of Municipal Clerk's Program Excellence in Governance in May of 2018.

Presentation

Criteria:

- Presentation will be delivered by a team.
- Presentation will be highly interactive and engaging.

Example Social Media Post

Following the money: How the City of Austin's Office of the City Clerk is illuminating the path through increased access to data relating to candidates and officeholders' contributions and expenditures and lobbyists' clients and expenditures. #TLG2019

Please write an abstract or short description for your innovation that would make conference attendees say "Well, I need to attend this session!"

In 2015, Austin City Council passed a series of transparency measures that expanded campaign finance and lobbyist reporting requirements. The goal was to increase transparency by bringing financial data related to the funding of municipal elections and interactions between elected officials, political action committees, and lobbyists into the light. These new requirements allowed media and Austin residents to track the interactions and relationships between elected officials and those who seek to influence elected officials. The Clerk's Office was charged with implementing the new requirements without additional funding for staff and resources. The result was the development of a series of processes, forms, and tools that allow data to be extracted from fillable PDFs, validate the data for facial compliance, import the data into a database, and publish the data online for the public. An additional challenge was to present complex, qualitative data to the public in searchable and understandable format through the City data portal and website. This session will demonstrate how existing resources combined with hard work and an innovative staff can implement transparency projects that are designed to instill public trust in elected officials without expanding the budget.

How will you make the session creative and unique?- How do you plan to be both entertaining and educational?- Include a description of how your session will facilitate group activities and/or interaction.- What will attendees be able to have as an actionable "takeaway" from the session?

The Clerk's Office case study is a unique success story because it used only existing resources and staff to create a complex, yet adaptable, system for implementing an extensive transparency initiative. The new system is dynamic, interactive and filled with engaging and comprehensive resources. With this same level of creativity and attention to usability, the Clerk's Office would present a visually appealing and interactive session utilizing many of the captivating animated trainings developed for filers. Recognizing that challenges from lack of funding and desire for more transparency are common with other municipal governments, the Clerk's Office will encourage attendee participation through group discussions and brainstorming sessions about how our solutions could translate to their own organizations and challenges. The material presented would include toolkits and resources for adapting and implementing similar processes in their organization.

Anything else you would like to add?