

City of San Marcos Open Government Guidelines

Government functions best when it is open, inclusive, responsive and accountable for its actions. Communities are strong when residents understand and participate in the civic process, have access to good, clear information, and are able to place confidence in their public officials. Openness in government is the basis for accountability, improved decision-making, public trust, and informed participation.

The principle of open, transparent government reaches virtually every aspect of the City of San Marcos' operations from the adoption of an ordinance to the posting of an annual budget or the way the City disseminates information to citizens.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a centralized focus for the City's ongoing efforts to provide greater transparency, openness and collaboration.

The City continues to research best practices in the public and private sectors and, with the assistance from the community, has developed guidelines and strategies for implementation that focus on the following Best Practices areas:

- (1) **Documentation and Records Management.** Transparency requires appropriate, easy-to-understand documentation of City actions. Good documentation provides accountability and clarity as well as the basis for the actions that have been taken.
- (2) **Financial Transparency.** The City will continue to make the budget process transparent and readily accessible to the public. The City will post as much information as possible related to the budget, as well as the budget itself, on the website. The City already makes available to the public a wide range of budget information including City contracts and City checkbook. The City will continue to assess how this information could be more easily accessible.
- (3) **Proactive Provision of Policy Information.** The City will provide opportunities for citizen input early in decision-making processes and utilize various methods to better notify the public regarding contemplated actions by the City.

The City continues to respond to written citizen requests under the Texas Public Information Act (PIA) as it applies to existing records.

- (4) **"Understandability" of City Communications and City Code Provisions.** The City will endeavor to use understandable language in writing City Codes, Council agendas and ordinances. Items should be consistently worded so they are easily tracked throughout the consideration process. When possible, project titles should reflect project scope or identifiable area.

Everyday communications will be presented to the public in the most easy-to-understand manner. Plain, non-technical formats for studies, reports and comprehensive communications will be encouraged. We will also develop strategies to address the needs of non-English speaking citizens.

In an effort to achieve greater understanding of how municipal governments operate, we will facilitate public participation in City functions, such as Citizen Police and Fire Academies, community workshops and encourage service on boards and commissions.

- (5) **Citizen Participation-Information Gathering/ Public Input.** The City recognizes the value and importance of residents and advisory boards providing input, making recommendations or offering feedback on policies and issues of importance to them, their neighborhoods or to the City at large. The City will continue to evaluate public participation processes to be sure they are clear and accessible.

While many actions taken by the City require public notice, notice may not always reach every affected or interested resident. The City will carefully address identification and advance notification of interested groups and methods that allow healthy dialogue of varied interests in a collaborative process so that varied impacts, opinions and options can be considered.

These guidelines will consider how the City can more effectively obtain valuable public input at critical stages in the decision-making process. The City will work collaboratively with all interested parties to achieve greater participation. City staff has been trained in the Systematic Development of Informed Consent (SDIC) process and will be utilized to gather input when appropriate.

- (6) **Available Media.** The City uses a variety of media to provide information to the public and will continue to expand the use of new avenues for effective communication.

- (a) **Website.** The City will make continuous improvements to the website to make the site more user-friendly and provide for easier “searchability” and “sortability” of information. City departments and divisions will be responsible for updating and keeping webpages current.

The City website will offer avenues for citizens to ask questions or report concerns for response and action by the City.

- (b) **Non-Electronic Media.** The City will continue to use traditional means to communicate with citizens who do not have access to electronic media, including news releases, newsletters, bilingual communications, media outlets, letters, signs, posters, the library and city facilities, special events, and neighborhood outreach.

- (c) **Government Channels.** The City uses two cable channels on Time Warner and Grande Communications to air City Council and Planning Commission meetings and to provide general information to the public. The City will consider expanding its programming as resources allow.
 - (d) **Newsletters and other media.** The City will continue to produce newsletters and utilize other media opportunities, such as e-newsletters.
- (7) **Additional Forms of Public Notice.** Texas law requires public notice by placement of ads or notices in the local newspaper, posting on the website and posting at City Hall. State law encourages the City to consider additional forms of electronic notice. The City provides for citizens to register for specific notices through emails with departments and signing up for RSS feeds through the website. State and City law determine who must be given individual (usually through the mail) notice. The City will consider enhancements to provide broader individual notice to citizens in the City.
- (8) **City Council and Planning & Zoning Commission Meetings.** The City Council and staff have developed a number of communication outreach initiatives, which include making the language of public hearing notices more understandable to the public. Staff posts public hearing notices on the government channel and the City's website. City Council and Planning & Zoning Commission meetings are broadcast live and replayed the following week on the City's government channels. Live video-streaming of meetings is also available on the City's website as well as an archived list of meetings for the previous year which can be replayed on demand. Action minutes and presentations are posted to the City's website following a meeting. In addition, question and answers with the press and public are reflected in official City minutes.
- (9) **Employee & Organizational Engagement.** The City will encourage and provide training for employee engagement to implement open government practices, including more proficient customer service.
- (10) **Predictability and Consistency.** The City will ensure consistency and accuracy of information is provided and disseminated.
- (11) **Feedback to Citizens.** Feedback to residents on how their input affected a public decision is important. The City will provide feedback through various outlets, such as conveying results of citizen surveys or responding promptly to citizen questions and requests.
- (12) **Campaign Finance.** Campaign finance reports by elected City officials and candidates are filed with the City, posted online and accessible to the public.

- (13) **Integrity of Information.** The City will strive to provide accurate, up to date information to best inform the public. The City will continue to review, monitor and correct errors to ensure accuracy of information.
- (14) **Avoiding Harm from Disclosure.** Both the Texas Public Information and Open Meetings Acts recognize that in certain specific instances the public interest may be harmed by disclosure. The City complies with State law in these areas. When appropriate, the City Attorney makes formal requests for Attorney General opinions.

The Open Meetings Act permits discussion in closed session for limited purposes. Executive Session during public meetings will only be used when necessary.

Legal advice is protected from disclosure by the attorney-client privilege, but as the client, the City is always free to waive that privilege. The City may decide the public interest in some subject matter outweighs the need for confidentiality in the communications between City officials and their lawyers.

Federal Homeland Security laws are designed for the protection of persons or property, public or private. These laws prohibit disclosure of security information relating to facilities such as airports and public water supply system. This policy will recognize the legitimate public interest in the protection of security information.

- (15) **Collaboration.** The City will continue to work collaboratively with all interested parties to determine ways to provide government services in the most transparent manner possible.
- (16) **The Cost of Transparency.** The City will consider the cost of transparency as part of its budget process, including staff training, communications resources, software, equipment, website development, and facilities.
- (17) **Ethics Commission.** In order to allow detect and prevent fraud and abuse of public resources, the City has an Ethics Commission to hear allegations of suspected abuse.

More openness can transform how government serves those who live, work and invest in San Marcos. Clear procedures and accessible, easy-to-understand records and information will promote the accountability of our public servants as they make decisions and conduct the public's business and will invite participation of residents to collaborate in the strengthening and governance of our City.