

Open Government Briefing Guide

August 27, 2014
Version 1.0



Open Austin
www.open-austin.org

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
About Open Austin.....	3
Credits.....	4
General Open Government and Open Data.....	5
Open Government.....	5
Open Data.....	6
Civic Hacking.....	7
Web Accessibility.....	7
Digital Inclusion.....	8
Social Media.....	9
Mobile Applications.....	9
Open Source Software.....	10
Open API.....	11
Drupal.....	11
City of Austin Activities and Resources.....	12
Open Government Resolution (Dec 2011).....	12
Open Government Directive (Aug 2013).....	12
Open Data Portal.....	12
Code for America Fellowship (2012).....	13
AustinGO.....	14
Communications and Technology Management (CTM).....	14
Innovation Office.....	14
3-1-1.....	15
City Council Emerging Technology and Telecommunications Committee.....	15
Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission.....	15

Introduction

This *Open Government Briefing Guide* has been created by *Open Austin*, and is being presented to all candidates in the 2014 City of Austin municipal election. This guide accompanies our Candidate Questionnaire and provides important information about the *open government* and *open data* initiatives in Austin.

This document and our candidate questionnaire are published on the web at: <http://www.open-austin.org/candidate-questionnaires/2014-austin-city-council-candidate-questionnaire>

If you have any questions, please email us at info@open-austin.org.

About Open Austin

[Open Austin](#) is a grassroots, citizen volunteer group. We advocate for open government, open data, and civic technology. We were formed in 2009 by citizens who wanted input into the City of Austin website redesign. Since then, we've worked with City Council members and city staff on various projects and events.

Some of the issues we've supported are:

- Adoption of an open government resolution – adopted by City Council, Dec. 2011
- Creation of an open data directive – draft issued by City Manager, August 2013
- Creation of an Office of Civic Innovation – Chief Innovation Officer hired March 2014
- Adoption of the Open311 standard – released July 2014

We are a non-partisan, independent, non-endorsing organization.

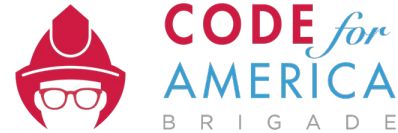
We actively participate in elections as an advocate and educational resource for open government and open data.

We have conducted a candidate questionnaire in every City of Austin municipal election since 2011.

In addition to our policy initiatives, we organize local volunteers to develop computer applications and tools with a civic purpose, such as the [Vote ATX voting place finder](#).

Over the weekend of May 31, 2014, we joined with St. Edward's University and SXSW to present the second annual [ATX Hack for Change](#), part of the *National Days of Civic Hacking* initiative announced by the White House.

We are associated with *Code for America*, a national 501(c)(3) organization, as the [Code for America Brigade](#) in Austin.



More information:

- Open Austin, www.open-austin.org
- Vote ATX, voting place finder app, voteatx.us
- ATX Hack for Change, <http://atxhackforchange.org/>
- Code for America, <http://www.codeforamerica.org/>
- Code for America Brigade, <http://www.codeforamerica.org/about/brigade/>

Credits

The Open Austin candidate questionnaire and this briefing guide have been produced by volunteers on the Open Austin Gov Team.

Contributors include Carol Eckelkamp, Asha Dane'el, Alane Fitzgerald, Juliette Kernion, Chris McConnell, Steven Polunsky, Chip Rosenthal.

Thanks to Austin Free-Net and St. Edwards University Office of Information Technology for providing graphic materials for this document.

Thanks to the following City of Austin departments for answering questions and providing graphic materials for this document: 3-1-1, Communications and Technology Management.

We gratefully acknowledge the individuals, community organizations and city departments that provided assistance, but contents of this document are the responsibility of Open Austin.

Copyright 2014. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).



General Open Government and Open Data

This section provides brief descriptions of general open government, open data, and related topics. We hope this background information will help you understand the programs and initiatives underway in Austin, described in the next section.

Open Government

Wikipedia defines *open government* as:

... the governing doctrine which holds that citizens have the right to access the documents and proceedings of the government to allow for effective public oversight. In its broadest construction it opposes reason of state and other considerations, which have tended to legitimize extensive state secrecy.

New technologies have fueled a new wave of open government, creating demand for open access to government data in digital forms, and driving innovation with new tools and methods.

The *Open Government Directive* issued by the White House in 2009 says:

The three principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration form the cornerstone of an open government. Transparency promotes accountability by providing the public with information about what the Government is doing. Participation allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so that their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society. Collaboration improves the effectiveness of Government by encouraging partnerships and cooperation within the Federal Government, across levels of government, and between the Government and private institutions.



In 2011, the Austin City Council adopted an [Open Government Resolution](#), discussed in the next section.

More information:

- Wikipedia, Open government, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_government

- White House, Open Government Directive, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/documents/open-government-directive>

Open Data

Open government data – or, sometimes, just *open data* – generally refers to government data published in a format that is easily loaded into and read by a computer.

For example, spreadsheet data in comma-separated value (CSV) format can be opened in Microsoft Excel, loaded into databases, and used by a variety of software.

Open data can improve transparency, contribute to volunteer efforts, drive business innovation, and educate the public about what the government does.

As Brett Goldstein, the editor of *Beyond Transparency*, says:

The rise of open data in the public sector has sparked innovation, driven efficiency, and fueled economic development. And in the vein of high-profile federal initiatives like Data.gov and the White House's Open Government Initiative, more and more governments at the local level are making their foray into the field with Chief Data Officers, open data policies, and open data catalogs.

While still emerging, we are seeing evidence of the transformation potential of open data in shaping the future of our cities. It's at the city level that government most directly impacts the lives of residents – providing clean parks, fighting crime, or issuing permits to open a new business. This is where is the biggest opportunity to use open data to reimagine the relationship between citizens and government.

The City of Austin maintains an [Open Data Portal](#) (discussed below), where it publishes open government data.

More information:

- Open Knowledge Foundation, *What is Open?*, <https://okfn.org/opendata/>
- Digital ebook, *Beyond Transparency: Open Data and the Future of Civic Innovation*, <http://beyondtransparency.org/>
- The Open Data Handbook, <http://opendatahandbook.org/en/index.html>
- Open Data Field Guide, <http://www.socrata.com/open-data-field-guide/>
- Open Data Glossary, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZbkQ2Ad66FKVj-v2T-UHKJbsh0CHV-dm9MEAoy6yT2Y/edit>



Civic Hacking

Jake Levitas defines *civic hacking* as:

... the act of quickly improving the processes and systems of local government with new tools or approaches, conducted with cities, by citizens, as an act of citizenship.

Civic hacking projects often use open government data to present information about the community, such as transportation schedules or road closures. Open Austin volunteers have produced projects related to transportation, animal services, and government transparency. In addition to improving access to information, these projects engage Austin's technology community with broader public issues.

Civic hackers are people, typically volunteers, who work on these projects.

Civic hacking often occurs at events such as periodic *hack nights* or multi-day *hackathons*.

The term *hacking* originated at MIT in the 1960s, to describe clever creations – sometimes pranks – carried out by the students. It was adopted by programmers to describe informal, creative software development, often testing the bounds of rigid processes. It later evolved a darker usage through the term *computer hacking*. Civic hackers reclaim the term in the tradition of software hackers.

More information:

- Jake Levitas, *Defining Civic Hacking*, <https://medium.com/civic-innovation/defining-civic-hacking-16844fc161cd>
- Wikipedia, Hacks at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MIT_hack



ATX Hack for Change 2014 (Photo credit: Lisa Woods, used with permission)

Web Accessibility

Web accessibility is the practice of designing websites so people with disabilities can use them. For example, people who are vision impaired may use screen-

reader software that can translate a website's information into synthesized speech.

An accessible website has the correct HTML code so the screen-reader software can translate the site accurately. For example, accessible websites allow mobility-impaired users to navigate with a special keyboard overlay instead of a standard mouse.

More information:

- Knowbility, <http://www.knowbility.org/>
- World Wide Web Consortium: Accessibility, <http://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility>

Digital Inclusion

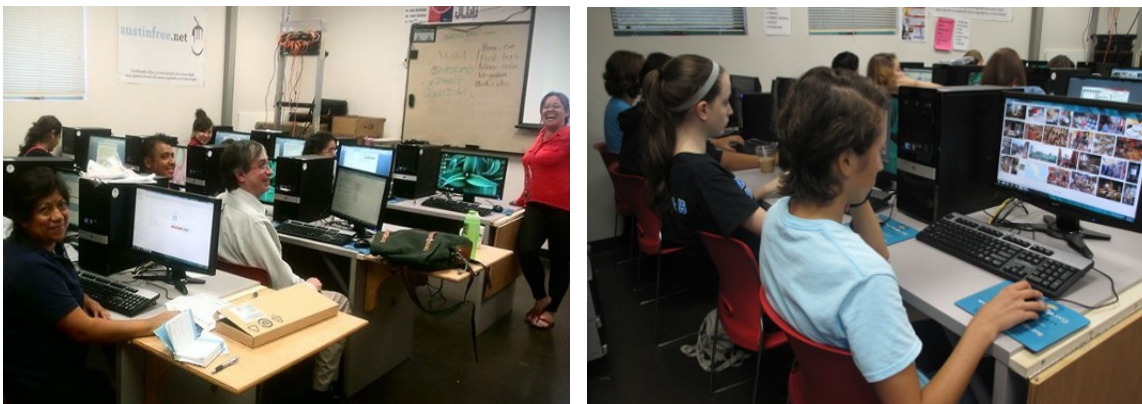
Digital inclusion describes efforts to reduce barriers many people face in accessing information and services online:

- differences in ability, such as blindness
- economic challenges that limit access to computers and Internet
- education and training gaps that leave many without an understanding how to access city websites and online services.

To make information and services available to a broad swath of Austinites, design choices such as browser support, file types, and website organization should be considered from a digital inclusion perspective. Also, see [Web Accessibility](#).

More information:

- City of Austin Digital Inclusion, <http://austintexas.gov/digitalinclusion>
- Austin Free-Net, <http://www.austinfreenet.net>



Austin Free-Net computer labs provide Internet access and training to the public.

Social Media

Social media are Internet-based applications that allow users to exchange information quickly and easily. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are popular social media platforms.

Local governments can use social media to quickly provide important information and respond to questions from the public. Different social media platforms have different uses.

For example, a city may use its official Twitter account to provide minute-by-minute, brief updates on where to seek shelter during a natural disaster. However, a city's Facebook page may be more appropriate for publishing official press releases and other information.



Mobile Applications

Mobile applications are software designed to run on devices such as smartphones or tablets.

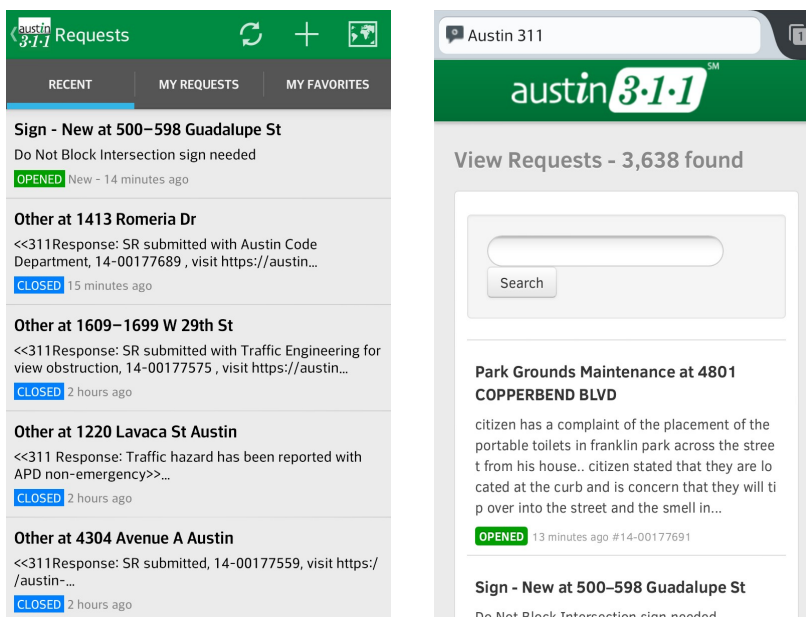
Mobile applications typically are implemented in one of two ways: either on a *native mobile application*, or on a *responsive website*.

A native mobile application is designed for only a specific device and operating system. For example, a native application designed for an Android smartphone will not work on an Apple iPhone, and vice versa. A native application differs, therefore, from a responsive website.

A responsive website is designed to display equally well across a variety of devices and operating systems. A responsive website determines, for example, whether your device is an Android smartphone, a Windows desktop, or an Apple iOS tablet, and resizes the viewing area and navigational controls accordingly.

A single responsive website might be a better option than building multiple native mobile applications, depending on your organization's needs.

Mobile applications are referenced in the [Open Government Resolution](#) adopted by the Austin City Council, discussed below.



Examples of two mobile applications: a native mobile application (left) and a responsive website (right).

Open Source Software

Software is traditionally delivered as code that runs on your computer, typically produced from source instructions. *Open source software* is software that is delivered with the source instructions. Unlike traditional software, open source software allows users to modify, fix, and enhance on their own.

Other advantages of open source software are low license costs (typically free), collaborative development, and robust user communities. The main disadvantage is that there isn't a vendor to respond to bug reports and feature requests – although community support and commercial support organizations often fill this gap.

Open source software can be well suited for government projects because of the low costs and opportunities for collaboration.

Open source software is referenced in the [Open Government Resolution](#) adopted by the Austin City Council, discussed below.

More information:

- What is Open Source?, <http://opensource.com/resources/what-open-source>

- Why isn't all government software open source?
<http://opensource.com/government/14/8/why-isnt-all-government-software-open-source>

Open API

An Application Program Interface (API) allows one software component, such as a mobile application, to talk to another component, such as a distant server on the Internet.

While open data provides public access to data, an Open API allows software to interact (list, search, sometimes submit and update) directly with data. Open APIs facilitate civic hacking. The *Open311 API*, discussed in the [3-1-1](#) section, is an example of an Open API.

More information:

- *What is an API?*, <http://apievangelist.com/>

Drupal

Drupal is an open-source content management system (CMS). It is widely used by government, non-profit, and commercial organizations as a low-cost way to publish information online. Drupal has a large and active community of developers and administrators who can support the software and customize it for a variety of publishing needs.

The City of Austin website is built on Drupal.

More information:

- About Drupal, <https://www.drupal.org/about>
- AustinGO User Reference, <http://austintexas.gov/drupalhelp>

City of Austin Activities and Resources

This section describes some of the programs and organizations relevant to open government and open data initiatives in Austin.

Open Government Resolution (Dec 2011)

The Austin City Council adopted an *Open Government Resolution* in Dec. 2011. This resolution declared a city commitment to “open government and the principles of transparency, efficiency, and collaboration.” The resolution directs the City Manager to work with the community and provide recommendations in support of [open data](#), [open source](#), [mobile applications](#), and [social media](#).

More information:

- Resolution 20111208-074,
<http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=161941>

Open Government Directive (Aug 2013)

In August 2013, the City Manager issued a memo with a draft *Open Government Directive*. This document proposes a framework to address the open data issues in the *Open Government Resolution* adopted by City Council. The directive has not been fully implemented. The City Manager has convened an Open Government Governance Board that currently is reviewing this issue.

More information:

- Memo from City Manager, "City of Austin Open Government Directive,"
<http://www.open-austin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Memo-to-Mayor-and-Council-with-attached-Open-Government-Directive.pdf>

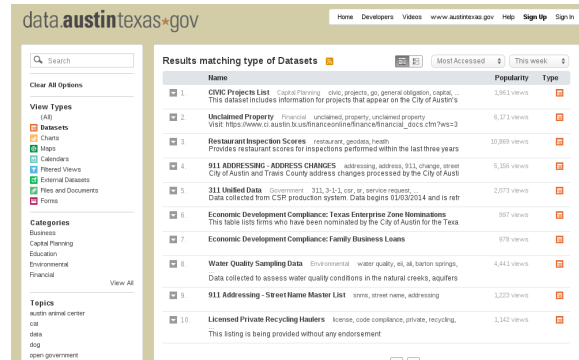
Open Data Portal

The City of Austin *Open Data Portal* is a website where the city publishes open data. Website visitors can view the data in tabular form, analyze it in charts and maps, and download it for processing by other applications.

Some of the most popular datasets include dangerous dogs, restaurant health inspection scores, and unclaimed property.

The open data portal has published 271 unique datasets as of August 11, 2014.

At the ATX Hack for Change 2014, volunteers developed a website called *How to Use the City Data Portal*, with information about how the community can use this resource.



The screenshot shows the data.austintexas.gov website interface. It features a search bar at the top left, navigation links for Home, Developers, Videos, and www.austintexas.gov, and user options for Sign Up and Sign In. The main content area displays a table of datasets with columns for Name, Popularity, and Type. The datasets listed include:

Name	Popularity	Type
1. CIVIC Projects List	3,953 views	
2. Unclaimed Property	6,373 views	
3. Restaurant Inspection Scores	10,888 views	
4. 911 ADDRESSING - ADDRESS CHANGES	5,358 views	
5. 311 Unified Data	2,073 views	
6. Economic Development Compliance: Texas Enterprise Zone Nominations	997 views	
7. Economic Development Compliance: Family Business Loans	978 views	
8. Water Quality Sampling Data	4,441 views	
9. 911 Addressing - Street Name Master List	3,223 views	
10. Licensed Private Recycling Haulers	1,342 views	

More information:

- City of Austin Open Data Portal, <https://data.austintexas.gov/>
- How to Use the City Data Portal, <http://atxdataportal.wikispaces.com/>
- Open Austin analysis of datasets, <http://data.open-austin.org/data-catalogs/views/by-department.html>

Code for America Fellowship (2012)

In 2012, the year the new city website and open data portal were released, Austin also participated in a *Code for America* fellowship. Three fellows were assigned to the city for the year. They met with city departments and community organizations, worked on open government issues, and developed some new tools, including the initial release of the *ATX Floods* application.



More information:

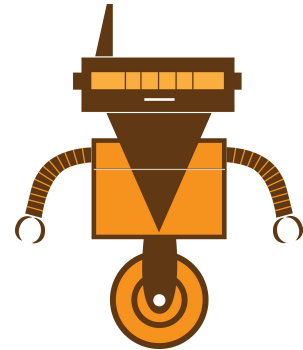
- Code for America Fellowship program overview, <http://www.codeforamerica.org/about/fellowship/>
- Press release, "Austin selected for competitive online technology fellowship program," <http://www.austintexas.gov/blog/austin-selected-competitive-online-technology-fellowship-program>
- Blog post, "Love letter to Austin," <http://www.codeforamerica.org/blog/2012/11/22/love-letter-to-austin/>
- ATX Floods, <http://www.atxfloods.com/>

AustinGO

The *Austin Government Online* (AustinGO) initiative is organized by the Community and Technology Management (CTM) department and Public Information Office. It includes the city website, the open data portal, and support for online applications published on the web.

More information:

- AustinGO home page, <http://www.austingo.org>



Communications and Technology Management (CTM)

The Communications and Technology Management department provides technology services to city departments and city partners. It is the city's IT department. CTM is responsible for technical implementation and support of the city website and [open data portal](#). The Public Information Office (PIO) and city departments are responsible for website content.

More information:

- Communications and Technology Management, <http://www.austintexas.gov/techreport/communications-and-technology-management>

Innovation Office

In March 2014, the city hired its first Chief Innovation Officer. Open Austin advocated to create this office to help bring new technologies and methodologies into city government, and to provide high-level focus on the open government initiative. The draft budget for next year proposes funding for the CIO and two additional employees.

More information:

- Open Austin white paper, "Recommendations Relating to the Creation of an Office of Civic Innovation," http://www.open-austin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/document_724B68BF-BE83-EE08-7A4B7DD60EB188ED.pdf
- Press release, "City Manager Ott Names First Chief Innovation Officer," <http://www.austintexas.gov/news/city-manager-ott-names-first-chief-innovation-officer>

3-1-1

City of Austin 3-1-1 answers questions and provides assistance to the public regarding any City of Austin department or service. In Feb. 2013, when the city proposed a smartphone app, Open Austin advocated for a number of items, including support for an *Open 311* gateway, which would allow community-developed applications to interact with the 3-1-1 system. City staff agreed and the City Council approved funding. The [mobile app](#) and Open311 gateway were deployed July 2014.



More information:

- City of Austin 3-1-1, <http://austintexas.gov/department/311>
- Open Austin article, "City approves new 311 services," <http://www.open-austin.org/article/248>
- Press release, "Austin 3-1-1 announces new smart phone app," http://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/311/311.Press_Release.7.30.14.pdf
- What is Open311?, <http://www.open311.org/learn/>

City Council Emerging Technology and Telecommunications Committee

This committee ("Emerging Tech") is a subcommittee of the Austin City Council. Its current members are Council Member Morrison (chair), Council Member Riley, and Council Member Spelman. City departments provide periodic updates to this committee on the AustinGO initiative and other open government and open data efforts.



More information:

- Emerging Technology and Telecommunications Committee, <http://www.austintexas.gov/department/emerging-technology-and-telecommunications-committee>

Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission

One of the 67 boards and commissions created by the Austin City Council, the CTTC is an advisory commission that makes recommendations to City Council in various areas, including digital inclusion, access television, open data, and the city website.

More information:

- Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission, <http://www.austintexas.gov/cttc>



ATX Civic Hackathon III / Code Across Austin, Feb 2013



ATX Civic Tech Expo at City Hall, May 2013