

Leveraging public engagement for economic development success

**CITY OF AUSTIN
ENGAGES THE
BROADER COMMUNITY,
BUILDS TRUST, AND
LANDS A MAJOR
LEAGUE SOCCER TEAM.**

A new era for a growing city

In October 2017, Precourt Sports Ventures, owner of the Columbus Crew, announced it was looking to move their team out of Ohio. Austin, Texas — the largest city in the country without a professional sports franchise — was at the top of their list.

But would the residents of Austin welcome them? As one of America's fast growing cities, Austin is no stranger to the challenges of growth, including equitable development.

? The Question: How can you effectively engage the public to address resident concerns while also delivering a major economic development win?



Equitable outreach and data-driven decisions

City of Austin was able to find relevant, reliable answers to their biggest questions by:

1. Reaching a large, representative population through traditional and virtual efforts
2. Analyzing resident input to get an initial picture of public concerns and perceptions
3. Following up with initial reporting and a secondary opportunity for input
4. Using public opinion to directly influence the terms of Austin's agreement with PSV

Engagement by the numbers

6,300
VIEWERS

1,025
PARTICIPANTS

683
EMAIL SUBSCRIBERS

383
COMMENTS



Proactively Engaging The Broader Community In Decision-making

Inclusive engagement, early in the process

The first step for Austin was working with PSV and the community to identify a possible location for the stadium. Public land for private enterprise meant high stakes for community engagement, and Austin elected officials asked staff to conduct a community assessment to ensure resident input was at the forefront of negotiations.

Given the community-wide impact of the project, Economic Development quickly pulled in the Communications & Public Information Office (CPIO) to partner on public outreach.

“This was about doing the right thing,” said CPIO Director Doug Matthews, whose team went about reaching residents across Austin’s 10 council districts.



A variety of tactics for survey distribution

The CPIO team use for primary public outreach tactics::

Regularly pushing the survey on social media

Live voting at in-person meetings that mirrored the questions posed online

Comment on mobile device or comment cards, uploaded into an engagement CRM

Participant addresses captured in engagement CRM for mapping

Overcoming challenges to build trust with stakeholders and residents

Accessibility through survey design

The CPIO team extended this emphasis on accessibility to the design of the survey itself.

To ensure ease of participation, the initial eight-question survey focused on being simple, clear, and relevant. Questions were worded in direct, approachable language:

“In general, how do you feel about having a Major League Soccer franchise in Austin?”

A key goal was to provide Council with a sense of the community benefits that would be most important to residents (e.g. affordable housing, transportation improvements, mixed-use development, etc.).

The response that followed is a testament to using multiple outreach tactics to meet residents where they are and thoughtful survey design.

Broad, positive response

- 84% of respondents reported feeling positive about an MLS team in Austin
- Top concerns, by weighted response prioritization: transportation, affordable housing, jobs, and youth soccer programs for those with limited access.
- Participation from all 10 council districts

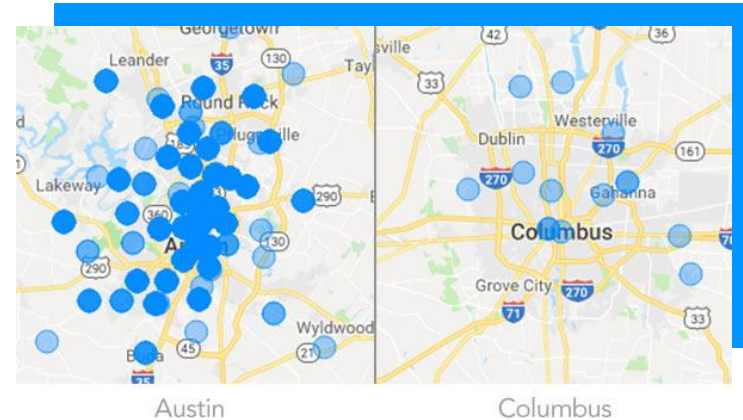
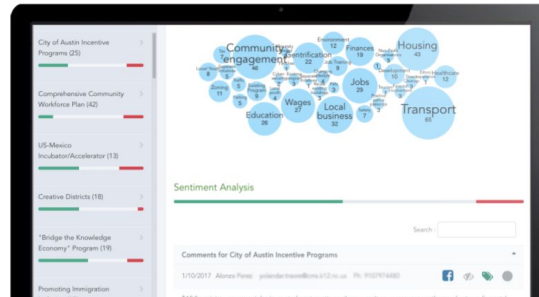
Overcoming challenges to build trust with stakeholders and residents

Building trust with smart technology

As Austin residents weighed the idea of a new MLS team, some of the Columbus Crew faithful were not ready to see their team go. The hashtag **#SaveTheCrew** was gaining steam on social media and concerns were raised when a Columbus sports reporter tweeted the online survey link to his followers. There were immediate fears this may flood the survey with unreliable input.

However, PublicInput's GeoIP functionality is able to identify the location of every survey participant. Looking at the data, the project team found that **fewer than 20 of the 1,000+ respondents were from the Columbus area**. These responses were excluded when analyzing

the results, and internal stakeholders, including the Mayor and City Council, were reassured the survey data was accurate and only input from Austin residents.



City of Austin uses GeoIP data and comment analysis to validate local residents and quickly understand public sentiment.

Closing the feedback loop to show residents they've been heard

“ [The survey results] certainly informed the conditions that the council laid out in their approval to move forward. ”

When the initial survey closed, Austin created visual reports through PublicInput and embedded them directly into the city's website. Austin was also able to let residents who provided an email address (680+) know the results had been posted, and thank them for participating. **The city council then took that public input and implemented it in their opening negotiations with PSV.**

The two-way communication didn't stop there: Austin offered up a second opportunity for input, this time in the form of an open forum, laying out the initial provisions between Austin and PSV. Its key focus areas are outlined on the right. A comprehensive set of draft terms are included in Appendix A.

Key topics returned to the public for feedback

- Financial considerations (e.g. requiring PSV to pay for maintenance and future renovations)
- Housing and affordability (e.g. subsidizing low-income housing units)
- Recreation and open space (e.g. open space for special events)
- Community events and programs (e.g. city use of the stadium; youth sports programs)
- Building and contracting (e.g. waste programs, using local vendors)
- Labor and wages (e.g. internship/work programs with the community college)
- Diversity and inclusion (e.g. dedicated marketing budget for reaching diverse communities)

Closing the feedback loop to show residents they've been heard

Re-engaging residents on these topics showed the City's interest in involving the public throughout the process, and allowed residents to elaborate on the issues that meant the most to them.

This follow-on round of engagement allowed for more nuanced input from stakeholders on specific concerns and hopes for the project.

With this data, the communications team returned to Council and the economic development team with a solid understanding of where the community stood.



Leveraging representative feedback for decision-making

Increasing confidence in council decisions

“A lot of times when we do this, we’re not presenting anything that surprises the council,” said Matthews, “but it arms them with reliable information.”

Many of the concerns ran parallel to the already existing concerns of Austin and other growing cities across the nation: transportation, affordable housing, and jobs.

With these topics weighing heavy on a decision, the City Council met in August 2018 to decide whether to move forward with negotiations to bring PSV to Austin.

In a scene familiar to many municipalities, over 100 residents lined up to speak at the Council’s public hearing. Many expressed strong opposition to any form of the project moving forward. **Would the Council need to take a step back?**

Overcoming the echo chamber effect

Normally, these strong voices can make it difficult to understand the broader community’s sentiment on an issue.

This time, the council had **a well-vetted process and reliable public engagement data** to point to. With clear public support for moving forward, and a detailed understanding of concerns to address, the Council voted to pursue negotiations with PSV on a new stadium project.

This clear community sentiment would also prove helpful beyond the initial decision. The key concerns and hopes identified in the community engagement process directly informed the [draft terms developed between the City and PSV](#).

A more complete listing of the terms set forward are included in Appendix A.

The Takeaway

COLLABORATIVE DEMOCRACY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY CREATES HUGE WINS

For Austin, public engagement success was not just about the volume of responses, but the representative nature and reliability of those responses. This validity, combined with the ability to analyze resident feedback across virtual and traditional tactics gave leaders the clarity needed for decision making, and ultimately showing the public that they had been heard.

Here's how we envision this process:

SEE IT LIVE

