A Sustainable Austin

Toward a Public Understanding of Sustainability in Austin

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Executive Summary

With the majority of the global population choosing to reside in urban areas, cities have become increasingly important sites for investigating our most challenging environmental, social, and economic issues. Sustainable urban development can only be achieved through a critical and comprehensive approach, and even then, the process is complicated by logistical, fiduciary, and discursive pitfalls. As both scholarly and mainstream experts have noted, terms like ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ are tractable terms with multiple meanings in different contexts. This is especially true when investigating sustainability issues at the urban scale, and the case of Austin, Texas is especially indicative of the complex discursive and logistical terrain that must be navigated when attempting to establish a clear trajectory for urban public policy.

Austin’s rapid growth has introduced a host of challenges that complicate the city’s desire to balance economic growth, social development, and environmental protection in a sustainable manner. Simply put, there is no perfect definition of a “Sustainable Austin.” There are, however, ways to identify key challenges and prioritize measures for effective sustainable development. Those efforts begin with public outreach.

This study attempts to gain a first glimpse into how Austinites define sustainability for their city. We asked Austinites to complete the sentence “A sustainable Austin is ...” to determine what is most important to each citizen—information that can then be relayed to city leaders to assist in developing policy measures that fit the needs and concerns of Austinites. This study is built upon the premise that public policy works best when it is built upon clear feedback from an engaged citizenry. By providing a platform for Austinites to define sustainability for their city, we were able to gain some insight into that diverse vision.

The results of this study are based upon over 400 responses from individuals who live and/or work in Austin. Some of the most common responses may not be surprising (i.e. concerns over rapid growth, requests for improved public transportation, etc.). However, the information provided may help to reinforce and better inform the city’s current policies and programs. Additionally, one of the most useful results of this study is that it revealed an apparent lack of public awareness or misinformation about future transportation programs and/or city plans to account for future growth and development.

The following pages provide background to this study, explain our methods, detail a summary of our results, and offer recommendations. In short, the results of this study indicate the following:

- Austinites are expressing significant concerns about rapid population growth and sprawling development. The City of Austin may benefit from increasing its level of public visibility regarding programs that mitigate the challenges associated with growth.
- Austinites are highly concerned with issues of mobility and transportation, and while many responses mentioned the importance of an efficient and well-maintained public transportation network, there were also concerns over infrastructure development related to auto and bicycle traffic.
- A large portion of Austinites have a multifaceted view of sustainability. While some participants limited their answers to environmental issues, many included comments about the importance of quality of life, affordability/cost of living, social equality, civic engagement, and economic vitality.
- Austinites are well educated about many of the environmental, economic, and social challenges that occurring in the city. And while generally hopeful for the future, some voiced concerns over misuse of the term ‘sustainability’ and were skeptical of platitudinous efforts to ‘greenwash’ environmental issues with superficial solutions.
1. Introduction: Defining urban sustainability for Austin

As numerous studies have noted we are now living in the century of cities, and urban areas have become the sites where the global problems of financial crisis, population pressure, climate change, resource constraints, and widening social inequality materialize at the local scale. At the same time, as centers for innovation, entrepreneurialism, and technological exchange, cities also hold the greatest potential for solving these challenges. Simply put, cities are sites of creation and destruction, regeneration and degradation, resilience and vulnerability. For this reason they are the ideal scale at which to investigate, promote, and apply the concept of sustainability.

The most widely accepted definition of the term ‘sustainability’ comes from the 1987 Brundtland Commission report which defines sustainability as “development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” But this is a broad definition that has, in recent years, been expanded and applied to numerous campaigns, programs, and business ventures. The rhetoric of sustainability is often complicated and easily (mis)appropriated for actions that fail to address environmental, social, and economic concerns in a credible fashion. The now well-touted environmentalist maxim of “think globally, act globally” further complicates efforts to define urban sustainability, as each city faces a case-specific set of challenges unique to its own climactic, economic, geographic, and social situation.

We developed this study with these basic discursive and contextual challenges in mind, and so before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge some key concepts that permeate the literature on urban sustainable development:

1. While initial conversations about sustainability primarily focused on environmental and resource conservation issues, this discourse now incorporates economic and social issues into a more comprehensive framework for addressing sustainability measures. Throughout this paper, we refer to this as the “triple bottom line of sustainability” or simply, “TBL.” The literature suggests that measures which employ this framework tend to have a higher success rate and higher level of public approval.
2. Because issues of urban sustainability are context-specific, it is largely agreed that community and citizen feedback/support is essential for the successful planning and implementation of sustainability initiatives. While encouraging citizen feedback is viewed as an optimal approach in theory, it is also met with some degree of skepticism, as the process is often associated with sluggish compromise and deliberation.
3. Related to the above, successful city governance must maintain a steady, clear, and accessible line of communication with its citizenry in order to encourage stakeholder buy-in and raise awareness about policy initiatives and programs.
4. Regions experiencing rapid growth and development are especially vulnerable to unchecked and poorly regulated modes of development. In order to maintain a level of credibility and legitimacy, city governance in rapid growth areas are must make great strides to maintain transparency and accountability.
2. Methods

Our goal is to explore how the term ‘sustainability’ is understood by the people of Austin and what facets of sustainability are important to its citizenry. Our study focused on reaching out to Austinites and to those with a vested interest in the future of the city by asking them to complete this sentence: “A sustainable Austin is...”

The aim of this project is to (1) raise awareness about the issues surrounding sustainability in Austin, (2) create an accessible platform for community engagement among Austinites, (3) and report our findings to community leaders, city officials, and the public at large.

The scope of our research forced us to cast a wide net in an effort to reach a wide audience. Participants could choose to respond in a completely open-ended manner and they were not limited in terms of creativity or length of response. Participants were encouraged to provide demographic classifiers, such as their home location or occupation, but were also given the option to retain anonymity. In an effort to achieve a mixture of purposeful and random sampling, we distributed 500+ business cards and posted flyers at strategically selected sites that were likely to contain the highest degree of socio-economic, educational, and ethnic diversity. Many of these initial contacts served as gatekeepers that led to discussions with other respondents. Consequently, this research included elements of chain or snowball sampling. The sites we traveled to include the Domain, the Downtown area, South Congress, the Barton Creek Farmer’s Market, Mueller Park, the HOPE Farmer’s Market off 4th Street and Comal Street in East Austin, and multiple other sites. We also gathered a number of responses at these locations during key events such as the Austin Earth Day Festival at Mueller Park and South by Southwest in the Downtown area. The distributed materials included an explanation of the project, as well as how to submit responses. Respondents were given the opportunity to respond electronically via email, Twitter, or Facebook. Also, members of the research team were available to document responses in the field by recording or writing down answers directly from participants. The participants additionally had the opportunity to write down their answers, rather than relying on our group’s transcriptions.

In addition, we sought out local organizations, nonprofits, and businesses to encourage participation in the project. We also utilized personal connections within the city to establish a foundational network of respondents. Finally, we utilized a diversity of social media outlets, including a website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and email, to spread awareness of our project to the people of Austin.

We created a website to showcase representative responses to the general public: http://asustainableaustin.blogspot.com. On the website, we have different tabs that provide information about the research group, our privacy guidelines, a photo gallery, and a running slideshow of exemplary responses along with photos from fieldwork. There is also a direct response option where respondents can send feedback via the website. Our findings were published to the website in May of 2013 and are now available to the general public at that site.
3. Results

We received 406 responses during the months of March, April, and May of 2013. A majority of these were received “on the street” from personal interactions with respondents during fieldwork. This method had the highest rate of response, whereas online responses (e.g. email, Facebook, and other social media sites) were less frequent. It should be mentioned that even though we very happy with the level of geographic, socio-economic, and educational diversity of our respondents, we do not feel that this is a sufficient sample size to draw definitive conclusions. Rather, this study provides a glimpse into what many Austinites are saying about sustainability, and may serve to confirm and/or complicate some current assumptions about public opinion within the city.

We coded the responses four different ways to represent the ways in which the data can be useful to different audiences. Each system has its own merits and disadvantages:

- **The Most Common Responses** represent a first level coding technique intended to communicate the diversity of responses received. In order to represent such a broad spectrum of responses, over 50 codes were created. They included such terms as water, recycling, quality of life, weird, local, bag ban, etc.
- **Triple Bottom Line Responses** (TBL) were coded with the intent to classify each response into either social, economic, or environmentally themed responses.
- **Policy Action Item Responses** were coded to represent those ideas which fit neatly into many of the City of Austin’s major environmental programs and initiatives. These responses may be used to prioritize policies that address environmental issues in Austin.
- **The Sustainability Action Agenda Responses** were coded in order to dovetail with the City of Austin Office of Sustainability’s Sustainability Action Agenda, which was launched on Earth Day of 2012. The categories used mirrored the office’s 10 areas of innovation.

3.1 Most Common Responses

The Most Common Responses represent a diverse number of codes that were created to include such responses as public transportation, water, conservation, and current topics such as the bag ban ordinance. We also included codes such as ‘feasibility,’ referring to the city’s likelihood to achieve sustainability, and ‘hope for the future,’ referring to responses that sentimentalized the possibility of a sustainable city. We established codes to most accurately label responses so that every theme or topic expressed was analyzed. We ended with a total of 54 first level codes (see chart 1 for the 15 most frequent codes), where ‘public transportation’ occurred most frequently with 45 responses, ‘civic engagement and democratic participation’ followed with 40 responses, and ‘food’ with 39. ‘Other,’ with a total of 36 responses, was a catch-all code for themes that did not fit neatly into any other specific categories. The purpose behind this original coding and analysis was to be able to record and share the diversity of opinions and concerns voiced by respondents.

A note of explanation: “Civic Engagement” refer to such responses that call for greater community involvement, better governance at the municipal level, and/or increased grassroots involvement. “Food” refers to comments about sustainable agriculture, local food, nutrition, and/or access to healthy food in the city. Responses could be coded more than once if they mentioned more than one issue. For example, consider the following response:
“A sustainable Austin is...one that has a better mass transit system, greater access to local food, and relies more on renewable forms of energy like wind and solar.”

This response received the following codes: Public Transportation, Food, Local, and Energy/Renewable Energy.

As with all forms of representative coding, some information is misleading. For instance, some of the terms coded under “growth and development” carry both positive and negative connotations. Here are two examples of responses with this theme:

“...is one that conserves water and limits growth. A sustainable Austin will not let just everyone move here. Growth in Austin is getting unsustainable. We don't have enough water and resources for everyone who is moving here. We've reached our limits. We can't sustain Austin right now. I don't want to turn into Dallas.”

“...one that grows! I don't want Austin to stay small. I like the style Austin has as a bigger city. It's different from other big cities in Texas and I like the unique way it is growing.”

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3.2 Triple Bottom Line

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) of sustainability is composed of three equally weighted spheres: environmental, social, and economic. We coded the responses based on which sphere, or variable, was addressed. In some cases, respondents provided answers that fit into more than one variable. For instance, 64 responses mentioned two of the three variables. Sixty-six percent of responses (n=42) mentioned social and environmental themes, 14 percent of responses (n=9) mentioned economic and environmental themes, and 20 percent of responses (n=13) mentioned economic and social themes (see Chart 4).

Responses where only one out of the three variables of the TBL are present: ‘environment’ = 139 (42%), ‘social’ = 78 (23%), ‘economic’ = 24 (7%), and ‘other’ = 93 (28%) (See Chart 3). All of the numbers mentioned above equal the total number of documented responses (406).

3.3 Policy Action Items

In order to increase the relevance of our study to Austin city officials, we developed a coding system that fell closely in line with many of the city’s priorities for environmental protection and conservation (as addressed on the COA Environmental website). These are action items that can be looked at as potential policy measures to be implemented. The following categories highlight the areas of policy most related to sustainability:

- **Green Spaces, Preservation, Ecosystem Services**: Refers to the improved preservation of green space, parks, and the conservation/preservation of ecosystem services such as water, air, soil, and biodiversity.
- **Improved Transportation**: Refers to improvements that can be made in public transportation, improved roads and bike lanes, and mitigation of traffic congestion.
- **Promoting Business, Job Growth**: Refers to increased job opportunities, the promotion of entrepreneurial pursuits, and economic growth.
- **Cultural, Creativity, Community**: Refers to the promotion of cultural and creative industries, the promotion of arts, culture, and music, and activities which are focused on community interaction and community building.
- **Recycling, Waste Management**: Refers to recycling, re-use, conservation of materials, and the safe and environmentally conscious management of waste and hazardous waste.
- **Education, Awareness**: Refers to adult and youth individual education, raising awareness of contemporary sustainability issues, and community education initiatives
- **Housing, Infrastructure, Power**: Refers to housing availability and affordability, improvements to urban and regional infrastructure (excluding public transportation), and energy and power issues.

### 3.4 Sustainability Action Agenda Responses

On Earth Day 2012, the Office of Sustainability for the City of Austin launched its Sustainability Action Agenda. Its goal is to not only to assure a sustainable future for Austin, but also to continue challenging itself as a nationally-renowned green leader. To achieve sustainability that equally benefits people, prosperity, and the planet, this new, two-year agenda encourages the Austin community to rethink the way they live, work, and play, so that together they may find new solutions to make Austin’s future more sustainable. By relying on 10 areas of innovation (Arts and Culture, Ecosystems and Green Infrastructure, Energy and Climate, Green Economy and Innovation, Health and Safety, Livability and Complete Neighborhoods, Mobility and Air Quality, Schools and Youth, Water Security, and Zero Waste), the City of Austin has been able to follow up on 40 signature initiatives and over 150 individual projects that promote citywide sustainable collaborations.

We used the Sustainability Action Agenda’s 10 areas of innovation as an additional way to categorize and present our results. By doing so, we are hoping that our research can further help the Austin community voice their opinions on the sustainability of their city as they continue to work towards accomplishing the goals of the Sustainability Action Agenda. After categorizing our responses into the 10 areas of innovation, “Mobility and Air Quality” received 82, “Livability and Complete Neighborhoods” received 64, “Zero Waste” received 58, “Health and Safety” received 51, “Ecosystems and Green Infrastructure” received 41, “Green Economy” received 34, “Arts and Culture” received 33, “Energy and Climate” received 31, “Schools and Youth” received 12, and “Water Security” received 10. Responses that did not clearly fit into any of the above categories were placed under “Other,” which received the largest number: 119 responses.
3.5 Beyond Coding: The Narrative of Responses

This research cast a wide net in order to encourage a diversity of open-ended, creative, and meaningful responses from Austinites. No rigid survey was used. Respondents were not given multiple choice options. Instead, they spoke freely and sometimes passionately about sustainability in Austin, and simple coding of responses into specific categories occasionally masked the breadth and depth of responses. This section presents a representative sample of responses in order to demonstrate their qualitative depth and complexity.

Issues related to rapid growth and development constituted a significant number of responses. Coding these often distilled ideas into simple categories such as public transportation, traffic, or housing affordability. This frequently oversimplified the fact that respondents would mention growth and then link it to concerns over other issues such as water supply, economic vitality, affordability, governance, and traffic. Consider the following examples:
A sustainable Austin...is one that conserves water and limits growth. A sustainable Austin will not let just everyone move here. Growth in Austin is getting unsustainable. We don't have enough water and resources for everyone who is moving here. We've reached our limits. We can't sustain Austin right now. And I don't want to turn into a city that looks like Dallas!

Anonymous
Male, White
Northwest Austin

A sustainable Austin is...transforming. With the growing population, problems occur when politicians try to please too many people at once. Unless priorities are maintained and upheld for many years at a time, I am afraid the Austin I love today may be drastically different in ten or twenty years.

Ryan C.
Male, Latino
South Austin

A sustainable Austin is...a community that is self sufficient in many different aspect[s]. Not only in energy sustainability but financially and commercially as well. The capacity to endure is difficult enough, let alone for an entire city to be sustainable. Now the fastest growing city in America, a sustainable Austin is now seeming less feasible.

Anonymous
Online

A sustainable Austin is...one where people drive less and one that has less condos. They’re tearing down everything. It’s becoming more corporate. It’s not the people that are coming, it’s more that they are buying into the image of Austin’s coolness and selling it to people.

Anonymous
Female, White
Downtown

A sustainable Austin is...an Austin where affordable dwellings aren’t knocked down so that unaffordable condos are being built. Austin should be a place where money is spent on maintaining the roads that average citizens drive on rather than building a Formula 1 track to attract big money from out of town, state, and nation. This town should be about recycling/re[using] rather than shiny/overpriced impractical. All the people coming to Austin because of the Austin myth of cool and weird are destroying those very quantities in this town. The change is being engineered by financial interests outside of this town, people who will not stop until Austin is little Dallas on the Colorado!

Scott Stevens
Male, Mixed Ethnicity
Online

The above responses were chosen because they are highly representative of the complexity of issues frequently offered in one response, but that still tied back into concerns over rapid growth and a particular mode of development viewed as ‘corporate’ or homogenizing. Often, respondents made reference to big box stores, condo/high rise development, and concerns that the city was starting to “look like Dallas.” It should be mentioned, however, that not all
responses regarding growth were negative. While in the minority, some respondents voiced appreciation for growth, calling it a “sign of prosperity” and arguing that growth provided more opportunities to implement green building practices and eco-friendly development.

Another frequent pattern suggested that Austin’s level of sustainability was closely tied to its unique social culture and attitude. Many respondents mentioned Austin’s progressive attitude, friendly culture, level of tolerance, or its reputation for “weirdness” and creativity:

A sustainable Austin is...bold, uncompromising, cheerful, and progressive. A sustainable Austin has no plastic bags in its grocery store. A sustainable Austin embraces marriage equality, employee non-discrimination, and immigration. A sustainable Austin continues to embrace difference – to learn from difference -- to remain different – to remain weird. A sustainable Austin grows, does not reject incomers, shares the wealth, and grows. A sustainable Austin does not worry about the threats posed by others. A sustainable Austin embraces cultural diversity and becomes weirder.

Isto Barton, Local Non-Profit Director
Male, White
Online

A sustainable Austin...maintains the Austin spirit. It holds onto the Austin spirit and respects the natural environment, without taking it for granted.

Anonymous
Male, White
Downtown

A sustainable Austin is...progressive and liberal. We don't have a lot of that in Texas, but it's here in Austin, so people are drawn to this and they want to be a part of it.

Cailyn Clayton
Female, White
Downtown

A sustainable Austin is...always going to be weird. It's the mantra of the city. It is a crutch for some people, almost a license to be different. It’s the uniqueness of the city, besides UT and the government. Put students and government together; that is almost a natural conflict. But Austin is easy. When you think of Austin, it’s one little enclave as the Democratic/Liberal part of the state. This already makes the city different. Right now, the housing market is unsustainable.

Bob Davis
Male, White
West Austin

Another one of the more common threads featured concerns over cost of living, affordability, and/or social equality in the city. Numerous respondents spoke directly about these concerns, but also, many qualified their responses by adding that environmental sustainability was only “worth” achieving if it met broader social concerns.
A sustainable Austin is...well, that’s a good question. I’d like to answer what a sustainable Austin is, but I am one of those people who can't take the time to consider it because I’m just trying to find a job and find some kind of affordable housing in this city.

Anonymous
Female, Latina
Downtown

A sustainable Austin is...affordable! Things have just gotten too expensive here.

Anonymous
Female, Black
Northwest Austin

A sustainable Austin is...in the optimal world, one where families of all income statuses would be able to afford everything they need. It would also be local so that people could walk to work and to the local store instead of driving to a big box store. And it should have a better transportation system, like more train lines.

Anonymous
Female, Latina
Northwest Austin

A sustainable Austin is...a city that closes the bridge between disparities and educates its people. It's a community of conscientious, pro-active individuals who are well informed about their rights. It is an Austin full of people who can shop locally, be healthy from within, live an aware life. It is an Austin that is able to live with a deep sense of respect for others in the community.

Cassie Bishop
Female, White
Northwest Austin

A sustainable Austin is...an economically just Austin. We live in an economic system where everyone is just worried about the bottom line. Everybody is looking for that place, and we can all find it in a way that allows us to all be equal across the board.

Jolando King
Male, Black
East Austin

A sustainable Austin is...one in which all people have access to affordable housing, fulfilling work, and meaningful education, and in which government works to knit communities together and to find lasting solutions to long-term resource[s].

Cait McCann
Female, White
Central Austin

Lastly, it is important to mention that many participants in our study took the opportunity to answer our question with a hopeful response about the future of sustainability in Austin. To be sure, there were detractors from this group; several participants remained skeptical about the meaning of ‘sustainability’ and its misappropriation and misuse by businesses and political
leaders. However, there was little question that for the most part, Austinites remained largely optimistic about the future of sustainability in their city. These responses regularly included comments about active civic engagement, creativity, and innovation. The below examples are representative of that sample:

**A sustainable Austin is...maintained by all the young people that come through and all the different people that are always coming from all different parts of the country and the world, because it really allows for people to congregate and mold their ideas together in order to provide a more perfect society (not perfect but just a society you actually want to be part of).**

*Michael Isaac*
*Male, Latino*
*East Austin*

**A sustainable Austin is...hopefully the future of Austin. Through community gardens, gardens within apartment buildings, and through joining communities together.**

*Chad Willis*
*Male, White*
*East Austin*

**A sustainable Austin is......is one that works together in its green efforts collectively, as a city. It can't just be a few people making decisions. We must be educated about the issues and raise awareness.**

*Katy*
*Female, White*
*Downtown*

**A sustainable Austin is...not a pie in the sky dream; it is the ultimate challenge which has humbled all previous civilizations. If we don’t figure it out, a dark age is in our future. If we do figure it out, the future could be a golden age. All past civilizations have had the ability to attain sustainability; it doesn’t require a high level of technology. After all, bushmen live in balance with their environment and they have a very basic level of technology. What is needed is a change in habits and mind sets. This is the real challenge. Eventually, perhaps sooner than we think, sustainability will happen on its own through natural, yet forceful and uncomfortable ways. The transition will happen and is happening; we have the option now to choose how painful it will be. A Sustainable Austin can lead the way to a bright future. It’s not a dream, it’s a necessity.**

*Vince Hanneman*
*Male, White*
*South Austin*

**A sustainable Austin is......one that continues the creativity. This whole world has become too logical and sterile. We need to sustain creativity to sustain life. Creativity is the catalyst that sustains. Austin is a creative city and must stay that way to sustain itself. A sustainable Austin never loses its creativity.**

*Ron*
*Male, White*
*Northwest Austin*
A sustainable Austin is......coming soon. With bike lanes expanding, a city compost pick-up beginning, and community gardens becoming ever-more embraced...oh the times, they are a changing.

Caroline Taylor
Female, White
Central Austin

4. Findings and Recommendations

Austin is a city in transition, and the responses in this study reveal the public's concerns about changes to the city's population, infrastructure, environment, and cultural landscape. The results section of this report summarizes the major findings of our study, but perhaps does not communicate the level of engagement expressed by many Austinites. Even though many responses were certainly brief and lighthearted (e.g. A sustainable Austin...is clean, creative, and fun!), a large number of responses communicated a strong level of civic engagement and awareness of the major environmental and social challenges occurring in the city of Austin. What was not often communicated, however, was a level of awareness of what precisely the city was doing to mitigate those challenges. Despite efforts to communicate many of the city's programs and initiatives, there was little discussion of these initiatives (except for mention of the recent bag ban ordinance).

Overall, despite Austin’s reputation for civic engagement, we found that many of the participants in our study had little knowledge of the City of Austin's future public transportation measures, infrastructure development, recycling/composting programs, water conservation initiatives, green building programs, or other efforts.

In addition, our results revealed a wide variety of concerns voiced by respondents, and that many of those concerns were expressed in a manner that reveals a comprehensive view of sustainability issues. While most participants viewed sustainability as a primarily environmental issue, a significant portion were also able to carefully articulate the links between social, economic, and environmental concerns. Many also showed little tolerance for empty rhetoric about sustainability. In short, this study revealed that a large and vocal number of participants exhibited a fairly high level of education about sustainability issues, but many (1) were unaware of city plans to address those issues and (2) voiced some concerns over political and/or corporate greenwashing.

Recommendations:
The City of Austin must prioritize issues related to mobility and public transportation. Austinites are concerned about the inefficiency of the existing public transportation system, equal access to that system, and the overall transportation infrastructure in the city. Responses such as “the light rail is great, but it doesn’t go anywhere,” and “I love Austin, but the traffic is becoming unbearable,” were very common.

The City of Austin must take measures to publicly address concerns over rapid growth and development. Responses seem to indicate that, currently, this conversation is limited. The City would benefit from frequent, accessible, concise updates about major issues related to growth in the city.
Based upon the above observations, we suggest that the City of Austin increase its level of visibility about current environmental programs and initiatives, and transparency about the efforts to develop new programs. This is particularly true for any plans for future public transportation or mass transit networks. While some of the lack of awareness may be related to the relatively recent initiation of programs like the Office of Sustainability’s Sustainability Action Agenda (now only one year old), it does not explain the widespread lack of public awareness about future plans for the MetroRail and Capital Metro bus system. We recommend a campaign that utilizes the city website, social media networks, alternative media, and mainstream news networks to raise public awareness about future plans for improving Austin’s public transportation system, infrastructure, and conservation programs. Related to this, we suggest further opportunities for Austinites to provide feedback about these issues. Extended conversations with many respondents revealed that they were not aware that they had access to this information on the City of Austin’s website(s), or that they had the opportunity to provide feedback. The city’s “Speak Up Austin” website is a positive example of this kind of public forum, but it is seemingly underutilized.

The City may benefit from capitalizing on Austin’s seemingly high level of civic engagement and awareness by continuing its successful campaign to encourage individual and community action. This includes public outreach programs, but also tax incentive and subsidy programs intended to encourage sustainability efforts.

Conclusion

This study mirrors much of what is already known about Austin and Austinites’ perceptions of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Respondents voiced concerns over rapid growth, a lack of efficient public transportation, cost of living, and quality of life. While respondents demonstrated a fairly high level of awareness of the major challenges within the city, few referenced specific city policies and programs to mitigate those challenges. In addition to other recommendations, this study suggests that the city demonstrate a greater level of transparency and visibility about their programs and policies, and that they engage in more effective and accessible forms of public feedback and education about sustainability issues in Austin. We feel that some measures have been taken to address these aims, but they are recent and would benefit from greater city-wide support.

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