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MANAGEMENT METRICS AUSTIN-STYLE: *ALL SMOKE AND NO BRISKET*

Some people call them performance metrics, others call them performance measures. We choose the latter. A performance measure is a quantifiable indicator used to assess how well an organization is achieving its desired strategic plans, with the ultimate goal of providing better results for the public.

What performance measures are used by the City of Austin today?

As a general rule, the City of Austin simply tracks activities in the form of budgeting or day-to-day department activities – numerical snapshots of what tasks it has completed. **It does not comprehensively use true performance measurement to know whether or not City plans and strategic goals are being accomplished.** The City spends a lot of employee time and resources telling us that it measures performance, but it is mostly all smoke and no brisket.

There are 120 key indicators included in Austin’s 2014 Annual Report, and 21 of the measures have been classified as citywide “Key Indicators” or citywide “Dashboard Measures”. These 21 measures are collectively referred to as the City of Austin Dashboard and are described below. The 2013-14 Annual Performance Report describes these as a “snapshot of performance for the most important services that the city provides.”¹ **Except for the bond measure, the 21 priorities are measures of city services at the department level, not measurements of the achievement of strategic goals.** The Dashboard metrics might be useful for budgeting city services, but they should not pretend to be performance metrics for the comprehensive plan.

The 21 Dashboard metrics fall into the following categories²:

- Public Safety
 - This Dashboard category does not measure coordinated safety performance. Instead, it tracks Uniform Crime Reporting data.³ *Imagine Austin* states the need to “coordinate performance measures across public safety agencies to better plan for additional facilities, units, and

¹ https://assets.austintexas.gov/budget/13-14/downloads/2013-14_Austin_Annual_Performance_Report_web.pdf

² <http://www.austintexas.gov/budget/eperf/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dashboardmeasures>

³ The Public Safety measures are based on the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, which provides for consistent crime reporting across the country.

staffing and to provide better oversight and service to all parts of Austin as the city grows”.

- Community Services
 - One of the six community services measures listed is “library attendance per capita”. This is not a measure of the citywide impact of libraries on citizens, which it should cover instead.
- Development and Transportation
 - One of the three measures shows “percent of building inspection performed within 24 hours of request”. It does not describe a citywide activity or even the general department level activity.⁴
- Utility/Major Enterprise
 - One of the four measures is “Drinking Water Quality: Turbidity”. It does not measure citywide strategic conservation goals prescribed in *Imagine Austin*.
- Economic and Financial Health.
 - Of the two measures, one covers “number of new jobs created through economic development efforts” and the other shows the City’s “bond ratings”.

In the 2013-14 Annual Performance Report, City management pays lip service on ways to align performance measures with citywide plans, to improve processes, to eliminate bottlenecks, and improve quality of work product. The Report also describes “Next Steps”, but there is no apparent connection between the next steps and attainment of the City’s strategic goals.

What should city management be measuring?

It is readily apparent that the *Imagine Austin* metrics are mostly not contained in current Dashboard performance measures. Budgeted dollars are being tracked by departments, but missing are specific implementation plans to track whether or not the dollars are being spent on strategic plan priorities or if departments coordinate with each other to achieve the desired goals. **Too many budget issues are addressed simply by adding headcount rather than by using a process approach.**

The Dashboard shows no performance measures for any City or Regional programs such as the Sidewalk Master Plan. Planning Services and Health and Human Services show no implementation of sidewalks in their performance measurements. Only legally mandated ADA budgeted sidewalks are being measured. There are no performance

⁴ See the *Zucker Report*. Regarding transportation, from 2009 to 2014, the percent of residents “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with traffic flow on major streets has trended down to 19% with a low target of 39%. This is an example of how the indicator should have been a management call to action many years ago.

measures relating to affordable housing, environment, small area plans, general budget spending, CodeNEXT, public art projects, or protection of neighborhoods.

We found that little importance is given to implementing the highest priority activities established in *Imagine Austin*. The comprehensive plan of *Imagine Austin* identifies Austin’s strategic goals. It contains 20 suggested metrics and high-level implementation activities, responsible parties, and next steps. It has goal statements called “Building Blocks”, defined as broad-ranging policies to guide implementation of the vision statements such as “to make Austin a more connected city”⁵. The City’s Dashboard and budget process largely ignore the Building Block goals. **For example, the Dashboard does not address:**

- Complete Communities – the vision defined in *Imagine Austin*,
- Number of affordable units built,
- Environment – such as creek health (percent of assessed watersheds in excellent, very good, or good health) or impervious surface (total and per capita),
- Percent of residents who are cost-burdened or severely cost-burdened (including transportation and utilities),
- Percent of residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness,
- Rates of disease, obesity, tobacco use by ethnicity and income for a healthy Austin,
- Water conservation,
- Enrollment numbers in, and/or dollars from, federal food and nutrition assistance programs,
- Sidewalk density,
- Development within activity centers and corridors, or
- Transportation ridership.

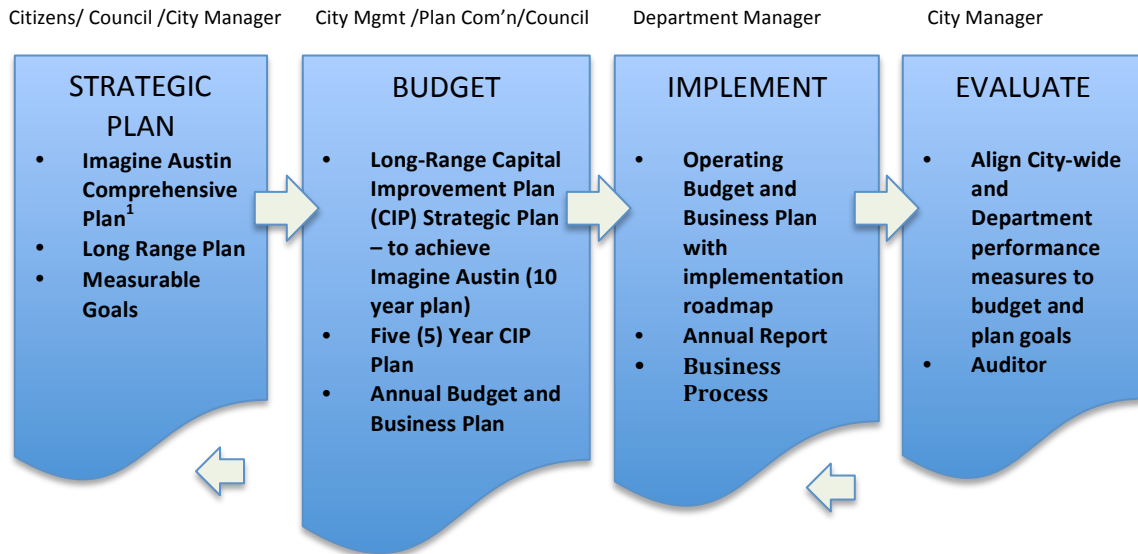
Hence, we have no way of knowing whether or not our strategic goals outlined in *Imagine Austin* are being met – all we know now is that the plans are not being implemented in an organized manner.

What should the City do to address this problem?

A strategic plan is the first tier of a three-tiered approach. In the business world, a long-range strategic plan has usable, measurable goals and strategies. Those are filtered into a five-year strategic plan (in addition to the budgeting efforts) to insure that the strategic plan is implemented. The annual business plan insures that the strategic plan is successfully implemented.

⁵ *Imagine Austin*, p. 95.

If Austin’s process were modified to utilize business practices, our current process would look like this:



Using this type of aligned performance management process should ensure that plans are implementable and measured. This is especially important because there is little room in the 2017 budget for increased spending or further property tax exemptions. Expense reduction through efficiency should be paramount.

Conclusion

Currently, Austin does an inadequate job of setting strategic goals and measuring their achievement over time. **Remedying this deficiency requires that the City reverse decades of a culture of budget-based planning that ignores the strategic goals of our comprehensive plan, *Imagine Austin*.**

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