

Council and staff retreat to Bastrop, thrash out directions

Team-building and candor yield promise of results for a better Austin

Goals for the Retreat

- Build upon existing relationships between and among council and staff.
- Allow council and staff to share information.
- Create an integrated vision of the council which incorporates specific individual council member priorities and projects and moves the budget process forward in a meaningful way.
- Construct effective and trust-building processes between and among council and staff which will further the council vision, member priorities, staff service and public confidence.
- Produce positive results.

Ground Rules

1. Ask questions to reality-check assumptions, to verify anything other than firsthand information and to replace defensive feelings that well up in your gut.
2. Frame your questions neutrally and seek to empower others.
3. Listen actively (instead of formulating responses while others are still talking).
4. Respect individual differences.
5. When in doubt, err on the side of inclusion.
6. Stay "above the line" (accept personal responsibility, don't blame others or be defensive).
7. Brainstorm ideas without judgment first.
8. Search for the interests underlying the positions.
9. Seek the win-win.
10. Act with integrity, for yourself personally, for relations with others, and for the process itself.

What a difference a year and an election makes. The 1996 council retreat at **Reicher Ranch** lasted five and a half hours and produced little. It wasn't held until Aug. 7, nearly two months into the terms of new council members **Beverly Griffith** and **Daryl Slusher**, and more than halfway through the public phase of the city budget process. The council was divided ideologically and led by mayor **Bruce Todd**, who had declared himself a lame duck. The coming 1997 council elections had already drawn a field of candidates anxious to grab the reins of power before the council could even begin to jell as a unit. Todd set the tone by asking the council members to focus on specifics that would translate to budget votes the next month. The retreat was attended by 10 key staff members who were allowed to do little more than listen, make a presentation of interest to the council and answer questions. By contrast, the 1997 retreat came just 12 days into the terms of new mayor **Kirk Watson** and new council members **Willie Lewis** and **Bill Spelman**. Held June 27-28 at the **Lower Colorado River Authority's Riverside Conference Center** in Bastrop, the retreat brought together the 25 people most responsible for guiding the destiny of this city. Emphasizing city government is a team function, eight executive assistants and 10 key staff members participated fully in most events. They turned off their cellular phones and pagers and spent 19 hours in sessions together, including learning a lot about each other as individuals. They brainstormed priorities, thrashed out differences and sweated through teamwork exercises outdoors. They bunked together, ate together and talked incessantly about their hopes for the city. They joked that the Progressive Seven would be known as the Magnificent Seven. With two years before the May 1999 council elections, they have a window of opportunity and, judging from things said at the retreat, this council and staff means to make the most of it.

The Bastrop retreat was led by **Mel Waxler**, an attorney who left the traditional practice of law to become a full-time mediator and facilitator. Waxler likened the **city of Austin** to a triangle of which one side is relationships, one is process, and one is results. Without both relationships and process, you don't get results, he said. The group spent eight hours the first day on building relationships. They learned each other's proudest accomplishments, heroes, and first great memories of Austin. They took tests that revealed their personal styles, gaining a key for how to approach each other. On the second day, they spent the morning developing a vision of Austin and ranking the qualities they value for the city. The day started as participants paired off at 7:30 a.m. and walked through the woods to ask each other for images, qualities and concepts that create a community. On returning, **Marc Dominus** of the **Saunders Consulting Group Inc.** helped the council members combine and winnow the visions into 16 concise statements. Each statement was entered into an Apple laptop computer. The computer was equipped with software and an FM radio receiver that captured each council member's ranking, pressed on a keypad. The statements were ranked for two criteria: inspirational value and urgency. Some of the votes were cast more than once, as Dominus elicited council

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Visions of Austin

After council members, executive assistants and staff members brainstormed on a morning walk, the council members scored each individual vision statement twice, once for how inspiring it is, and once for how urgent it is. Each vision was ranked numerically, from one (for not very inspiring or urgent) to nine (for very inspiring or urgent). Here's how the visions ranked for the whole council.

Vision	Urgency	Inspiration
Healthy, sustainable neighborhoods	8.5	8.5
Socially, environmentally and economically sustainable	8.5	8.2
Getting people around easily	8.5	8.0
City government more responsive to citizens	8.5	7.5
Compact city	8.2	8.0
Great place to be a kid	8.0	8.5
Urban village where pedestrian is key	8.0	7.5
Greenway trail systems	7.5	8.2
Vibrant downtown	7.5	8.2
People need to feel safe	7.5	7.0
Sense of partnership	7.5	6.2
A woven fabric of cultural diversity	7.0	8.0
Libraries as a community gathering place	7.0	7.5
Lots of people enjoying themselves	6.5	7.5
Relationships with areas developing around us	6.5	6.0
Plant many seeds and we'll see magnificence	5.5	7.0

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

comments about unusual votes, such as when the council members were in wide disagreement on a particular statement. Sometimes the debate raised the scores, sometimes not. (See chart, "Visions of Austin," page 2.) It was late morning before the group began to open up with frank dialog about what the vision meant to each of them personally. Watson talked about the things he had heard on the campaign trail, about citizens who wanted speed humps, a stop sign or a library, while the council was arguing about things that seemed to have no relevance. Slusher agreed. "The voters have clearly spoken," he said. "This is the greatest opportunity any of us will have in our lives." Watson later echoed Slusher. "We may have the best opportunity in our lifetimes, or in the city's lifetime." The vision exercise brought out strong personal feelings. When discussing inclusion, mayor pro tem **Gus Garcia** said, "I go to parties in West Austin and I feel like I'm in a foreign country." In talking about how inclusion also encompassed the council's relationship with the development community, Slusher said, "All seven of us got elected with the support of the environmental community...I think the development community should think about that. The ball's in their court, not ours, but I'm going to do everything I can to work with them." When debating the vision that Austin ought to be a "great place to be a kid," city manager **Jesus Garza** reminded the council, "This is a very violent place for kids." The council ran out of time before it could refine the rankings. Still, it was an eye-opening beginning. "The council wanted a sense of where it is headed," Waxler said. "This is a context...This is a foundation for a vision statement." At the lunch break, Griffith said of the discussion about a vision for the community, "There was disagreement but no disagreeableness. When there were differences, we just laughed about it." After a year of conflict with a deeply divided city council, she added, "I'll enjoy going to work."

By the time the team completed lunch they had been at the retreat for a solid 24 hours, an intense time of introspection and strenuous participation. With just five hours remaining, they went back to work knowing the toughest part lay ahead, a discussion of working relationships. Seated in a large ring of chairs facing each other, Waxler opened by saying this would be the time for everybody to speak what's on their mind. "No matter how tough the issues are, it will be all right if you stick to the ground rules," he said, going over the procedures adopted at the beginning. (See "Ground Rules," page 1.) Then they launched into it. "I'm not convinced there is a clear, red line between policy and its implementation," Watson said. To be effective for the two years this council will work together before another election, he said, the process needs to be better defined. Slusher concurred. He said it's not just political rhetoric, the city really is at a critical juncture. "It can be a polluted, deteriorated inner core like so many other cities, or we can make it a better city despite its larger size," Slusher said. For him, the choice was clear. "I've spent two decades of my life fighting and working to make Austin a better place. I've made financial sacrifices and my family feels it every day," he said. "This opportunity we have now is the culmination of those 20 years, a 20-year, boom-and-bust

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

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What They Said

The council retreat produced many memorable statements that did not fit into the story:

Assistant city manager Jim Smith: "For 13 years in Austin I've been frustrated by communication. In other cities, I would sit down with council members. I could write a script for council members so they would look good at council meetings. I haven't had a single experience like that in Austin. We get resolutions. We get 'council speak.' Hopefully, something will come out of this."

Roger Duncan, director of Planning, Environmental and Conservation Services: "One way I'm unique, I've sat on both sides, on council and on staff. As amazing as it seems, both sides are right. When I was on the council, I was sure I was sandbagged...A fresh start is a great concept. The trust develops as we work together."

Assistant city manager Marcia Conner: "We give you the pluses and the minuses, but once you say do it, we do go ahead and do it. We are here to help you....We all have the goal to make this a more livable city."

City attorney Andy Martin: "It's wonderful to have a council that looks to the same constituency while it's here. We need to find a way to communicate so the staff doesn't have to summon up a big amount of courage to tell you what you don't want to hear. It may not fit into the world view of the people you've been talking to, but it's better than being sandbagged and staff talking to others in the community who have power. It goes to...integrity."

Paul Saldana, executive assistant to mayor pro tem Gus Garcia: "If you don't make dust, you eat dust. Over the next couple of years, I plan to make a lot of dust."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

cycle that changed Austin forever." Then he launched into a litany of past mistakes that raised hackles among staff members. "I say bluntly, based on the experience I've had, I don't have faith that the staff will carry out the policies like the council intends." In all, Slusher spoke for 15 minutes. Reaching into the distant past, he criticized the **South Texas Nuclear Project** being brought back for a second election a year after it failed. He hammered the oversizing of water and sewer lines into the Hill Country. Things that had gone awry more recently, Slusher said, included a February 1996 flawed consultant's report on the electric utility that failed to mention stranded investment, and overstated the need to cut the general fund transfer. Among things Slusher counted as staff errors during his first year on the council were the failure to disclose key financial information regarding the proposal to extend sewer service to the **Davenport Municipal Utility District**, and the **Lamar Street Bridge** consultant not providing alternatives that did not involve adding vehicle lanes, as ordered by a previous council. "We're the policy makers," Slusher said. "The voters' will is on us. It will be the seven of us who must stand in judgment of whether we've done it right." Later, he said he was willing to give the staff a shot at him. "We need to be frank if we're going to work together," he said.

Spelman recalled the history of public administration going back a century. "We have to tell (staff) what we want. They can't read our minds. If they don't know, they will make battlefield decisions." Garcia said lobbyists, the **University of Texas**, the **Real Estate Council of Austin** and others are more powerful than the city council and had influenced both staff and council. "Those guys are connected. They have more resources than us," he said. "We're not the most powerful people in Austin. To the extent we understand that, we will do a better job because we will be realistic." Garcia cited the encampment ordinance as an example of private-sector influence. "We're going to do surgery on that ordinance because it criminalizes homelessness," he said. "We still don't have the shelter the business community said they would help us build when we put this ordinance in place." Council member **Jackie Goodman** complained about the staff's occasional refusal to comply with the council's wishes. "It's almost like somebody, somewhere is setting me up for a political hit," Goodman said. "I do enough myself to set up political hits." Lewis said, "A lot of the staff can say, I'll work on it, but (council members) are going to leave eventually." Griffith diagrammed a possible aid that showed how the council could develop policy with staff assistance, and the staff could implement policy with council assistance. After more than an hour of listening to mostly criticism of staff performance, Garza joked, "I want to retire to my room and cry." Recalling the earlier lessons about accepting responsibility, Garza said, "For the things mentioned today, we accept responsibility." He said the staff has pressures the council may not have recognized. This year alone, he said, "We've had 91 separate directions" from the council. "We can't be right all the time. We don't have the staff or resources to get it done. We cower when you call. You are powerful." Ultimately, staff and council are in it together, he said. "The council is in it as a body. When the council moves in separate directions, you'll see the staff confused. If there's focus, there can be results." ❄