

Austin, Texas

November 2025



Small Business Insights and Policy Recommendations Report



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Isaac Quintanilla
The Cauldron



Suzanne Daniels
Brentwood Social House



Eric Brooks
Black Pearl Books

Executive Summary

For years, Austin has enjoyed a well-deserved reputation as an entrepreneurial hub. Regularly finding a place in reports and rankings identifying the best cities for new start-ups, Austin has long attracted a variety of new and established tech businesses.¹

But all-too-often, these national reports about the state of entrepreneurship focus on narrow segments of small business creation, shining a spotlight on tech start-ups, while offering little insight into the restaurants, food trucks, and small retail shops that form the lifeblood of local economies and communities.

To address the lack of insights on Austin's local small business environment, this report quantifies the regulatory pain points for opening a small business in the city and features local entrepreneurs' experiences navigating these barriers.

As one business owner told us about the permitting process, "It takes years off your life. You try to tackle one thing at a time. You get through one hurdle and try to find what the next one is."

In this report, you'll find the following:

- The individual steps for starting both a restaurant and a food truck in Austin, Texas.
- Insights from real Austin entrepreneurs about what it's like to navigate these requirements.
- Opportunities for Austin officials to implement best practices from cities across the country to make their city friendlier to small, local entrepreneurs.

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a yellow baseball cap with a logo, a plaid jacket over a white t-shirt, and dark cargo pants, stands on a paved sidewalk. He is smiling and has his hands in his pockets. The background shows a city skyline with various buildings and greenery under a clear sky.

Tamuka Simango
Water Your Plants

About Cities Work

Everyone has the right to earn an honest living, and city officials want to ensure their constituents can do exactly that: pursue their small business dreams while contributing to the local economy. But due to regulatory roadblocks, high fees, and time-consuming permitting and licensing processes, many entrepreneurs struggle to make their dreams a reality.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Cities Work is the Institute for Justice's nonpartisan regulatory consulting initiative committed to increasing economic opportunity and fostering entrepreneurship in cities across the country. We partner with cities to make it cheaper, faster, and simpler to start a small business—all free of charge.

We approach our work from the entrepreneur's perspective, letting their experiences guide our work. Through working directly with relevant stakeholders—including prospective and current small business owners, research institutions, city officials, regulators, and economic development organizations—we identify the city's real-world hurdles to starting a small business and offer comprehensive regulatory reform strategies based on these findings.

This report was made possible by the generosity of Austin's entrepreneurs sharing their time and stories with us and our close collaboration with the Economic Growth Business Incubator.

A Masterclass in Supporting Entrepreneurs

Economic Business Growth Incubator

Despite Austin's rapid economic growth, systemic barriers continue to prevent many small business owners, particularly those from historically underserved communities, from accessing the tools, training, and support needed to build sustainable and resilient enterprises. Persistent economic disparities in Central Texas disproportionately impact low-to-moderate income entrepreneurs, women, immigrants, and Spanish-speaking communities. Many lack access to professional networks, capital, and culturally relevant business education, limiting their ability to formalize operations, grow strategically, or respond to shifting market demands.

The Economic Growth Business Incubator (EGBI) was founded in 2003 to fill this gap. Since, EGBI has provided bilingual, culturally competent business training and individualized business coaching in both English and Spanish that meet small business owners where they are, often as sole proprietors or micro-enterprises, and walks alongside them as they build capacity, income, and employment within their communities. Their clients represent a wide range of industries, including construction, food service, home services, childcare, creative arts, and retail.

EGBI's impact in the community has earned recognition as the #1 ranked business accelerator by the Austin Business Journal in 2023, 2024 and 2025. EGBI also received the 2024 CAN Butler Award for their Spirit of Collaboration, recognition as one of the Best Places for Working Parents® in Austin, the Community Champion of the year by the Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and a Platinum Seal of Transparency for 2024 by Candid. In 2025, the City of Austin recognized them as one of the local organizations that make Austin a Welcoming City. Most importantly, they have over 200 5-star reviews on Google that reflect the experiences of EGBI's stakeholders. **To learn more about EGBI's next events and workshops, please visit egbi.org/events/. To schedule your first 1-on-1 coaching session, go to egbi.org/coach/.**

Regulatory Analysis

The time, money, and resources required to navigate a complicated regulatory environment pose a steep barrier to entry for starting a small business. While obtaining one individual permit may not seem onerous, starting a business requires multiple permits and licenses to operate legally, and the costs add up quickly.

Notably, the permit and licensing processes are particularly difficult for lower-income and historically disadvantaged entrepreneurs to navigate. While larger businesses or entrepreneurs with significant resources can hire a permit navigator and afford the back-and-forth process with the city, emerging entrepreneurs often cannot. Burdensome regulatory requirements make starting a business difficult for even the most experienced entrepreneurs—and make entrepreneurship even less accessible to individuals who are not wealthy, native English speakers, or highly educated.

In 2023, we began researching what the city

of Austin requires of entrepreneurs to open a restaurant or food truck and have updated the process maps with the legislative changes that have occurred since then. These process maps demonstrate how the cost—both in time and resources—of the city's regulatory requirements poses a significant barrier to entry.

Key Research Findings Include:

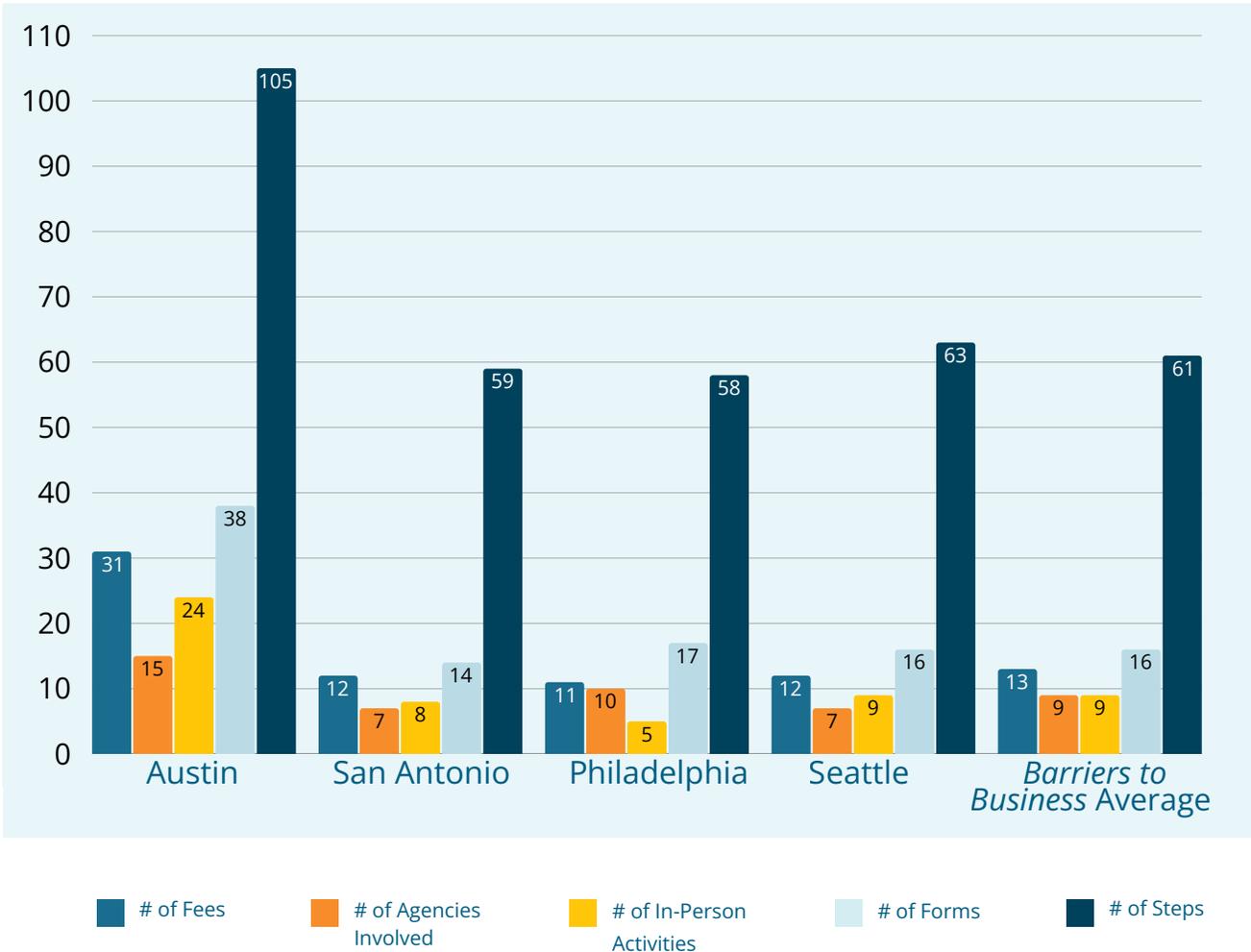
- The city's website satisfies 2 out of 5 one-stop shop criteria.
- The process of starting a restaurant in Austin is complex. It takes 105 steps—more than in any of the 20 *Barriers to Business* cities we've studied, with Boston ranking second at 92 steps.ⁱⁱ
- Regulatory requirements are unclear and often lack chronological order. Until entrepreneurs submit their plans to the commercial intake or other respective departments, it can be very challenging to figure out what requirements and fees apply to them.

One-Stop Shop Analysis

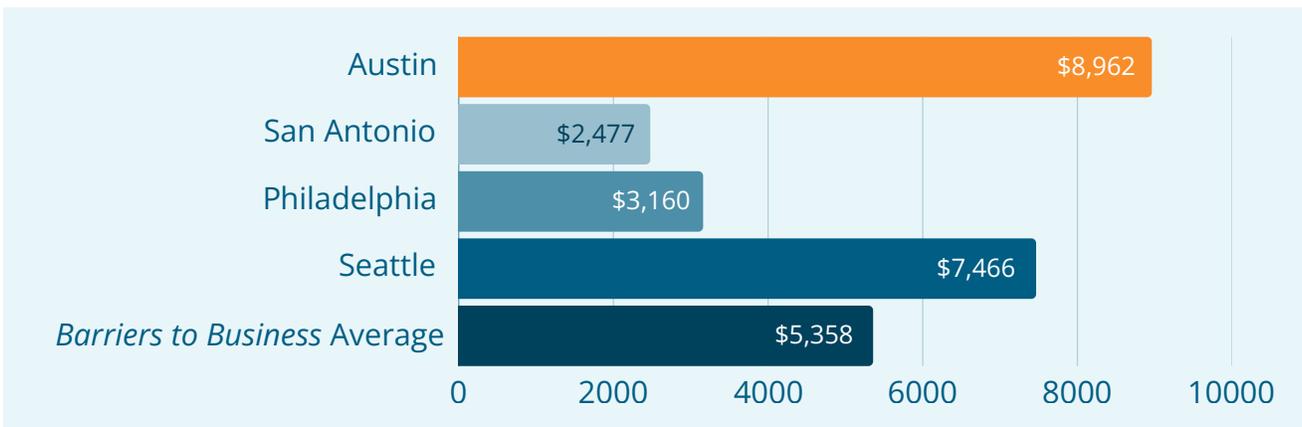
Austin's website satisfies 2/5 of our one-stop shop criteria.

- Connecting city requirements with processes from other levels of government.
- Completing forms and registrations through the portal, not through each agency's own website.
- Covering all city requirements, not just requirements for getting a business license.
- Providing a single log-in opportunity so entrepreneurs can organize information and track progress in one location.
- Guiding entrepreneurs effectively through the process.

OPENING A RESTAURANT IN AUSTIN VS. OTHER CITIES



TOTAL COST OF OPENING A RESTAURANT IN AUSTIN VS. OTHER CITIES



STARTING A RESTAURANT IN AUSTIN INVOLVES:

- Total Cost: \$8,962
- Number of Fees: 31
- Number of Agencies Involved: 15
- Number of In-Person Activities: 24
- Number of Forms: 38
- Number of Steps: 105

Please see Appendix A for the detailed restaurant process map.

In comparison to the 20 *Barriers to Business* cities we studied, **Austin scores the worst in every category for opening a restaurant besides total cost**, with only San Francisco and Minneapolis costing more.

It was challenging for us to determine what items were required, in what order, and how much it would cost. You can find helpful materials on the city's website and Youtube channel, but you first must sort through the endless maze of webpages and PDFs. When we reached a dead end, we spoke to representatives over the phone, on the website chat, and scheduled appointments with them to meet. The common answers to our many questions were: *it depends; you need to ask a different team; and once you submit everything, then we can tell you what you need to do.* The representatives were friendly and trying to be helpful, but the siloed nature of the teams resulted in us being sent on goose chases to find what should be relatively straightforward answers.

The sheer number of steps makes this process onerous, and that doesn't even take into consideration the time and money spent trying to figure out these steps. The City offers some pre-application meetings and expedited review meetings where representatives from each department are in attendance to review their respective requirements. However, you must pay for these, which can cost thousands of dollars. If an entrepreneur does not first succeed in submitting all required materials to the right department in the right order, they will be rejected and must submit revisions and pay the applicable fees, also potentially costing thousands of dollars. The number of in-person activities also acts as a barrier to people who work full-time jobs, have families, or don't have consistent access to transportation.

With Austin's current regulatory environment, anyone would struggle to open a restaurant—especially the entrepreneur who is opening a business for the first-time, is from a historically disenfranchised background, or doesn't speak English as their first language.

STARTING A FOOD TRUCK IN AUSTIN INVOLVES:

- Total Cost: \$1,568
- Number of Fees: 11
- Number of Agencies Involved: 8
- Number of In-Person Activities: 8
- Number of Forms: 15
- Number of Steps: 32

Please see Appendix B for the detailed food truck process map.

Barriers to Business Food Truck Average

- Total Cost: \$1,468
- Number of Fees: 8
- Number of Agencies Involved: 7
- Number of In-person Activities: 5
- Number of Forms: 11
- Number of Steps: 35

In comparison to the 20 *Barriers to Business* cities we studied, Austin scores close to average for opening a food truck.

However, recent statewide legislation will change this process. The "Food Truck Freedom Bill," signed into law on June 20, 2025, establishes a single statewide licensing system for mobile food vendors in Texas. The law aims to eliminate the patchwork of local city and county permitting rules that previously made it difficult for food trucks to operate across jurisdictions.

Under the new framework, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) will issue and oversee mobile food vendor licenses, replacing the need for multiple local health permits. The bill prohibits local governments from limiting the number of vendor licenses, restricting operating hours or distances from restaurants, or requiring additional health inspections unless investigating a food-borne illness. It also removes the statewide requirement for commissary kitchens when a food truck is self-contained and meets sanitation standards.

HB 2844 begins phasing in during late 2025 and takes full effect on July 1, 2026.

Suzanne Daniels
Brentwood Social House



Entrepreneur Insights

In 2023, we hosted seven entrepreneur roundtables with 22 entrepreneurs from various backgrounds and business types. Some of these entrepreneurs were in the early stages of starting their first business, and others were serial entrepreneurs who have started businesses in Austin, Buda, and other surrounding areas. While the experiences of these entrepreneurs ranged, the in-depth conversations with them highlighted the following issue areas as common regulatory obstacles to starting a small business in Austin. We grouped the themes into three main categories while recognizing that these obstacles often overlap. Each category of insights is accompanied by a main goal that encompasses what entrepreneurs said they would like to see from the city.

NAVIGATING PERMITTING AND LICENSING PROCESSES

Goal: Champion simple, accessible, and transparent permitting and licensing processes that appreciate the resource constraints within which entrepreneurs work and ensure the opportunity for businesses to comply with city requirements.

Lack of Upfront Information, Complex Permit/License Categorization, and Maze of Requirements Create Confusion and Ambiguity for Entrepreneurs

- Entrepreneurs have a hard time figuring out where or how to start navigating the regulatory process.
- The technical and governmental jargon used to describe permits, licenses, and other requirements increases entrepreneur confusion.
- Unless you can hire a permit navigator or know someone who has gone through the process and is willing to walk you through it, accessing correct information can be prohibitively difficult.

- Entrepreneurs feel like the city doesn't prioritize access to information, even though it is one of the most important starting points for entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs want to comply with the city's requirements, but often, they just don't know how.

I can't imagine being a first-time entrepreneur in Austin—there is no way to understand the language and intent of the requirements. You will die under the weight of bureaucracy.

I've always thought navigating the requirements is the biggest challenge to getting a brick-and-mortar.

Lack of Transparency in Inspections Creates Perception of Subjectivity

- Entrepreneurs feel like inspections are subjective, reporting inconsistency in enforcement and a lack of clarity regarding inspection requirements. One inspector will say one thing; another inspector will say a different thing.
- The lack of clear guidance on requirements and anticipated timelines causes entrepreneurs to need reinspections, incurring additional, expensive inspection fees.
- The lack of transparency in the inspection process also contributes to the perception of subjective inspections. Some inspectors provide detailed information as to why an entrepreneur did not pass an inspection; others only provide vague bullet points.
- Entrepreneurs want to know exactly what they need to do to pass an inspection on the first try and would prefer a detailed manual rather than a brief overview.

"I want to follow the health code rules. I want to do the right thing. But every inspector we have had has their different pet peeves—like how one of them said we have too many cuts in our cutting board. There are "requirements" like this in each inspection, where I did not know it was a thing the inspector was looking for."

"I would even be okay with a 20-page manual that is user-friendly about what the inspectors are looking for and requiring."

"Inspections cost between \$100 - \$200. Between fees alone it had to be at least \$3,000 to \$4,000. The health guy had to come out three to four times. It felt subjective. This subjectivity can help or hurt you. If they like you, they will be softer on you and vice versa. You don't get the same inspector each time, and they will go back on [what] other inspectors [have said]. It is a poker game of playing them and playing the system to get to the next step."

"We will look at trees on new properties and not even consider buying the property if there is a heritage tree since I will never be able to do anything with that property. The resale value of the properties will crash because of the tree requirements, and from a developer perspective, I won't touch it."

"The tree requirement is on hell on earth. The cost to move a tree is incredibly steep. A business on Rainy Street had to move a tree less than 40 feet catty corner, and it cost \$75,000."

"The city told us we needed a 750-gallon grease trap even though we don't [do full food service]. We ended up having to install the 750-gallon grease trap anyway, costing us thousands of dollars."

"Dead rent, sunk cost. One 30-day delay can equal 30 days out of your pocket."

City Requirements and Associated Costs (Including Delays) Stifle Small Businesses

- The cost of navigating complex city requirements disproportionately harms small and micro businesses. While chains, restaurant groups, and wealthier entrepreneurs can afford to hire permit navigators, accountants, and other professionals to help navigate the process, individuals who are just getting started or come from modest means often cannot.
- The timeline of complying with city requirements can also be detrimental to small and micro businesses. Every delay that prevents opening costs entrepreneurs rent and lost revenue.
- These costs can lead to small and micro businesses closing their doors before they are even open, giving up mid-process, or shutting down shortly after opening.
- In particular, Austin's heritage tree requirements, mandatory minimum grease trap size, and site plan requirements are very costly to entrepreneurs.

City Requirements are Misaligned with their Goal of Supporting Small Businesses and Promoting Public Health and Safety

- Multiple entrepreneurs who opened a small business in Austin said they would never do it again due to all of the city's requirements.
- Some entrepreneurs also had experience opening small businesses in a nearby town. These individuals said navigating the regulatory requirements was much easier and more affordable than in Austin and that it felt like those towns wanted them to succeed. Austin's onerous and confusing requirements are pushing small businesses out of the city.
- Some entrepreneurs shared that they opted to operate or remodel without city approval because it would be cheaper to take the risk of being fined rather than a guarantee of losing money due to city delays.
- If a reasonable individual cannot successfully comply with the city's requirements due to complexity, cost, or delays, and instead chooses to risk operating underground, the city is not achieving its goal of promoting public health and safety.

- Requirements specifically tailored to address real public health and safety risks are necessary; however, the city's lack of upfront information and complex processes for these requirements can act as a barrier to growth. The city should ensure straightforward and simple processes for these important requirements.

"It took 1.5 years to get our permits with a site plan exemption for a remodel from application to approval. There were no concessions from the city of any kind. Simultaneously, I got [a business] going around the same time in Buda, and we were able to get it open in six months."

"My friends that have owned and started businesses in Austin in the last 13 years made Austin what Austin is today. Most of them don't want to do business in Austin anymore, and I don't want to go through this process again either—people who have been through it are so scarred and tainted."

"Once you go into childcare centers, you have to have a kitchen cook license. It escalates as it goes up. Registered home, licensed home, childcare center. The city being in the way is the reason I haven't moved up. I make more money staying small and working less."

markets or special events—uneconomical. Often, new and micro-businesses could pay more in fees than that day's profit.

- The city also decreases opportunities for micro-businesses to grow through strict and prohibitory regulations. For example, the city prohibits businesses from vending at more than six special events a year. Additionally, the city only allows street vendors to operate in one specific public location. This limits micro-business entrepreneurs' ability to test the waters, get their business started, and develop their customer base.

"If I am doing a [pop-up] event on Saturday, that is one permit I have to pay for. If I am doing another [pop-up event] on Sunday, I have to get another permit. The process is fairly easy, but the amount adds up."

"If you are vending at an event or market and your booth tables are apart, they will charge you for a temporary permit for each table. But if the tables are touching, they only charge you for one."

"The harder the barriers to business, the better for me.' That is the tactic here at play. Only certain developers and entrepreneurs can afford it. The cost to play in the game has gone up over the last 10 years."

ACCESSING CITY RESOURCES AND AFFORDABLE FORMS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Goal: Establish equitable access to city staff and resources and allow valuable forms of entrepreneurship that are more affordable than a traditional brick-and-mortar.

Limited Options for Economically Accessible Ways to Start a Business

- The city's regulatory compliance costs make the more affordable ways to start or determine the market viability of your business—like vending at farmers

Perception of City Prioritizing Big Businesses over Small

- Entrepreneurs feel like the city provides more resources or opportunities to support larger businesses rather than small and microbusinesses. For example, the city offers expedited plan reviews, but charge thousands of dollars that only entrepreneurs with significant resources can afford.
- Additionally, microbusiness owners explained how challenging it was to get help from different small business programs in Austin. Since the definition of small businesses often includes much larger businesses (up to 100 or even 500 employees), microbusinesses are often at a disadvantage of being selected for

various programs, since they often do not have the extensive business revenue and receipts that the larger businesses have.

- Small business owners felt like the city and its resources were unapproachable or unattainable for them, especially as an entrepreneur of color.

"The city has money they are giving away, but you must have employees, not contractors. All of the up to 500 (employee) small businesses got the money because they have staff to do that."

"I think their expedited review process is great, but it is essentially a bribe: pay us more money and we will do it."

"Outside of getting city permits, I haven't done any work with the city. As a Black-and-women-owned business, [the question] is, where do you start? Running a business, I don't have time to research and figure it out. You apply for stuff, don't hear back—it is a daunting process."

"The builders can get the economic incentives, but the small businesses are being left out of the conversation."

INTERACTING WITH THE CITY

Goal: Increase regulatory transparency and accountability at all levels of city government and improve customer service.

Poor Communication with Entrepreneurs and Delayed City Responses

- Entrepreneurs reported generally feeling of a lack of respect or acknowledgment of the time and resource constraints of entrepreneurs.
- They understand the city departments also have constraints but feel like a little communication could go a long way. For example, contacting an entrepreneur if

the city is doing construction that will block their storefront instead of offering no advanced notice, or providing a narrower timeframe of when an inspector might swing by instead of a full-day window that requires the entrepreneur to be free at any moment.

- Entrepreneurs expressed that getting an appointment with the city is one of the most challenging aspects of regulatory compliance. Some shared that you must schedule two or three months in advance, and others mentioned long wait times for responses while city staff were on vacation. These delays can be costly for small businesses.
- Business owners also reported their perception that city employees are apathetic when entrepreneurs ask for help. Entrepreneurs clarified that they had great experiences with certain city employees, but in general it feels like a hopeless feat.

"There is a ton of construction blocking our driveway. At no point did we have contact from the city to see how they can be less destructive to us. As a small business, it seems like we are continually being pushed to the back burner."

"When you call the city, they aren't eager to help you."

"We sent an email to Parks and Rec, and they didn't reply within a week, so we went in person to follow up. The email was in the person's junk folder. We would have been waiting in limbo if I hadn't gone in person. I'm sure that's not the first time that happened."

"For them to come do an inspection, they say, 'I will show up between 8am and 5pm tomorrow.' I have work to do, I can't just be sitting here the whole day. You could give me a 30-minute heads up. How are you making it so difficult for people? You can call, email, or text me. You are not respecting our time; we also have work to do."

Inconsistent or Inaccessible Information Provided by the City

- Multiple entrepreneurs described receiving incorrect or inconsistent information from city staff, forcing them to fix resulting issues. These issues delayed their openings and cost them hundreds or even thousands of dollars.
- When using online city resources, entrepreneurs reported having to spend hours searching to find the correct, applicable information. If entrepreneurs did not use the “correct search term” the city uses, they could not find the information. Additionally, the online resources contain broken URLs and require users to navigate through a maze of sites and pages.
- Many entrepreneurs emphasized the lack of clear information on what taxes they should be paying as a business, which allowed entrepreneurs to be led astray by accountants with incorrect information. The entrepreneurs thought they’d been paying their taxes properly until they got notices from the city.

“Our very good friend had to close down his business because the city gave him a permit and said everything was okay. A year later, the city says, ‘you did that wrong.’ Where is a small business getting the money for these things? We have to pay ourselves, our employees, our property.”

“Even the inspectors have questions about what is required. We make individually packaged gluten-free lemon tea bread to sell at our coffee shop. The inspectors told us we needed to have a label with the name and address of our business on each packaged slice of bread. I asked them if we needed to make labels for this other food item we were selling, and they said they didn’t know. They looked into it and got back to me but still didn’t know for sure.”

“I get overwhelmed by too much information especially when it is government speak. That’s why I look for things on YouTube. I have never had to work with the government, so I just don’t know what to do.”

“For any of y’all that want to get into food and beverage, there are so many taxes I would never guess were required. Almost every day some tax is coming out of the bank account. Where is the guidance? Not all accountants are competent, and some might not know your business. We need some type of tax structure or cadence.”

“I have done a lot of research through the city’s website, Google, and following others that have a similar business to mine. I learn stuff all the time, but I have those moments where it can be really discouraging. It is hard to navigate everything. People will say buy this course to help you, but it might not actually work.”



Harshit Gupta & Elliott Curelop
Madhu Chocolate



Reform Recommendations



Patricia Bedford
Suga's Cakery

Local small businesses are what makes Austin's culture and character so vibrant. But this past decade, Austin staples like Hut's Hamburgers, Vulcan Video, Aster's Ethiopian, Shady Grove, Giddy Ups, La Mexicana Bakery, Lucy in Disguise, and many more have closed due to a variety of factors, including high property costs, COVID-19, and inflation—all of which are augmented by challenges navigating local regulations.

As Austin continues to change and grow, it is increasingly important for the city to remove onerous regulatory requirements that act as barriers to entry, limiting entrepreneurship to those with significant resources or a law degree.

Over the last few years, the city of Austin has taken positive steps towards streamlining the permitting and licensing processes. We applaud the city for moving in the right direction with reforms such as:

- Allowing childcare service businesses to operate in residential zones by right;ⁱⁱⁱ

- Providing exemptions to mandatory grease trap requirements for certain cafes or food establishments;^{iv}
- Creating an on-site inspection option for food trucks rather than requiring the food truck to be brought to the respective city office;^v and
- Passing a resolution to simplify the building permitting process for small businesses.^{vi}

We hope the city continues this progress with the following reform recommendations designed to increase access to entrepreneurship and support local small businesses by making it cheaper, faster, and simpler to start and grow a small business in Austin.

These reform recommendations are based on our regulatory research findings and local entrepreneur insights but are not all encompassing. Cities Work stands ready to assist the City of Austin in identifying and rectifying additional regulatory barriers to business.

Cheaper

RECOMMENDATION 1

Reduce License and Permit Fees

Starting a small, simple restaurant in Austin costs more than \$8,600 in licensing and permitting fees alone. That makes it one of the most expensive cities in the country, and it would have ranked 3rd in fees behind only San Francisco and Minneapolis in our Barriers to Business study.^{vii} By comparison, San Antonio's license and permit fees to open a similarly designed restaurant totaled just \$2,477,^{viii} and Ft. Worth's fees came to \$4,250 when we studied the city in 2023.^{ix}

Simply put, Austin has some of the highest licensing and permitting fees in the country for small businesses.

Many of those fees, like rezoning or land use determination fees, happen extremely early in the process when entrepreneurs are first working with engineers and architects. This creates the first of many potential traps for would-be business owners: it's important not to sign a lease and start paying rent until you understand and work out issues like zoning. The last thing an entrepreneur wants to do is to start paying rent only to discover significant additional costs and delays.

[1.1] Emerging Business Fee Reduction Act

Austin should adopt the Emerging Business Fee Reduction Act to support small businesses getting started. This act reduces certain regulatory fees for eligible small businesses across a five-year period.

Fee Waiver Timeline:

- Year one – 100% of fees waived.
- Year two – 75% of fees waived.
- Year three – 50% of fees waived.
- Year four – 25% of fees waived.
- Year five and later – 0% of fees waived.

Fees to be Waived:

- Business-specific license/permit
- Sign permit
- Certificate of occupancy
- All building, trade, and tree related permits

Eligible Business Requirements

Businesses must be located within city limits and meet at minimum three of the following criteria to be eligible:

- Be a new business, a business moving locations within the city, or a business that is renovating their commercial space.
- Be a local business, defined as a business that has fewer than five other locations outside of the city.
- Submit an affidavit confirming status (certification not required) as a minority-owned business enterprise, women-owned business enterprise, disadvantaged business enterprise, LGBTQ-owned business enterprise, or veteran-owned business enterprise as defined by the city's Small and Minority Business Resources' Certification Division.^x
- Submit either an affidavit confirming a Personal Net Worth (PNW) statement that demonstrates a PNW of less than the city's predetermined amount in accordance with their Small and Minority Business Resources' Certification Division, an affidavit confirming the prior year's gross revenue receipts under an amount predetermined by the city, or an affidavit confirming an estimated first-year gross revenue under an amount predetermined by the city.^{xi}

Businesses that fraudulently obtain eligibility will be subject to repayment of all fees waived and be ineligible for future eligibility for the Emerging Business Fee Reduction Act.

Please see Appendix C for the Emerging Business Fee Reduction Act model ordinance.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Encourage Low-Overhead Forms of Entrepreneurship

[2.1] Temporary Food Establishment Reform

Temporary food establishments are valuable opportunities for entrepreneurs to test their products, reach new customer bases, and provide a more affordable option for running a business.

Under current law (Section 10-3-96), temporary food vendors must obtain a new permit for each special event and are limited to six events per year. There is also a separate permit required to vend at farmers' markets. This creates excessive costs and paperwork for both vendors and city staff, encouraging illegal operation and limiting economic mobility for new and under-resourced entrepreneurs.

The city should modernize temporary food establishment permitting in Austin by replicating King County, Washington's Temporary Food Establishment permit model. King County (which includes Seattle) successfully switched from per-event permits to an annual permit approximately a decade ago. Since this transition, King County has not experienced an increase in food safety challenges and has benefitted from the economic opportunity and culture brought to the city by temporary food establishments. Austin should:

- Remove the six-event cap on temporary food establishment permits.
- Establish one annual permit to cover temporary food establishment vending, and an option to add coverage for farmers' markets.
- Replace per-event permits and non-mobile food vendor permits with:
 - A 1–4 Event Tiered Permit
 - An Annual Unlimited Event Permit
- Include an option on the application to add farmers' markets to the vending permit coverage, which incurs an additional fee and maintains the permit holder must comply with the current farmers' market regulations.
- Require certified booth food safety training for moderate- and high-risk vendors (defined below).
- Establish a four-inspection model: one required inspection at the first event, plus three random inspections for annual permits.
- Offer emerging business pricing (50% discount) for first-time annual temporary food establishment permit holders.

Based on King County's successful reform, the city should experience the following benefits from transitioning out of a per-event temporary food establishment permit to an annual food establishment permit:

- Increases revenue for the city by:
 - Reducing costs for small vendors by hundreds to thousands of dollars annually, allowing them to invest in expanding their businesses and generate additional tax revenue in the future.
 - Saving Health Department 600–900 administrative hours annually (based on King County data).
- Streamlines vendor permitting in alignment with national best practices modeled by King County, which saw no increase in food-borne illness outbreaks as a result of implementing this policy.
- Promotes public health by bringing more vendors into compliance.
- Increases access to entrepreneurship by allowing business opportunities with low overhead.

This ordinance creates an accessible, enforceable, and scalable path forward that advances public health, economic equity, and Austin's goal of supporting local, small businesses.

Please see Appendix D for the temporary food establishment reform draft legislation and Appendix E for the King County Reform case study.

[2.2] Home Occupation Reform

Home occupations are a natural beginning for many businesses. Not only do they provide flexibility, but they utilize the resources an entrepreneur already has by providing an affordable space for business. Compared to traditional small business owners, home-based business owners are more likely to be female, minorities, single, and renters.^{xii}

Under current law (Section 25-2-900), home occupations are limited to the occupants of the dwelling (with exceptions for (a) a medical, professional, administrative, or business office; (b) an art workshop or gallery; (c) a music, dance, or photography studio; or (d) handicraft or hobby instruction) and may not generate more than three customer-related vehicle trips per day. The city should ease outdated regulatory burdens on home occupations while maintaining the city's current safeguards to prevent nuisance activity. We recommend Austin adjust its home occupation restrictions on employees and customer-related vehicle trips.

First, employee restrictions harm the normal operations of many businesses. Austin should allow home occupations to hire non-occupant employees. Many other cities permit at least one to two non-occupant employees. These employees can be crucial in helping with administrative tasks and other normal business operations.^{xi}

Second, the three customer-related vehicle visits per day cap severely limits businesses, especially in a car-centric city like Austin. Austin should remove this customer cap and allow customers and clients to be present on premises. If there is not adequate off-street parking available, no more than two customers may be on the premises at one time. Other cities, such as Detroit and New Orleans, do not limit the number of clients permitted at one time or in one day.

This reform increases access to entrepreneurship by making home occupations a realistic business opportunity that creates jobs, acts as an affordable launchpad, and provides a flexible source of income. The city should celebrate home-based businesses for the economic opportunity and entrepreneur diversity that characterizes this sphere.

Please see Appendix F for data on home-based business entrepreneurs.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Support the Development of Commercial Spaces Designed for Small Businesses

[3.1] Allow By Right Accessory Commercial Units (ACUs)

Cities across the country have begun legalizing Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to address the housing crisis. A similar approach can be taken to address the affordable commercial space crisis: allowing by right Accessory Commercial Units (ACUs).^{xiv} ACUs provide entrepreneurs an option for affordable micro-business commercial spaces that supports walkable cities, facilitates community, and helps build generational wealth.

In 2016, Buffalo, New York began recognizing ACUs ("shopfront houses") as an approved use.^{xv} Buffalo's shopfront houses have been popular neighborhood fixtures for years, and the changes to the zoning code made this reform possible. In 2022, Raleigh, North Carolina amended their municipal code to allow "live-work" businesses to operate in detached units on residential properties.^{xvi} In 2025, we have seen many cities and states discuss legalizing ACUs and the conversation will only continue growing in 2026.

Austin has the opportunity to become a leader in reinvigorating the local economy by allowing ACUs by right in residential zones, helping address the city's urban sprawl by bringing microbusinesses to neighborhoods throughout the city. On October 9, 2025, Austin City Council passed a resolution directing the city manager to "minimize barriers to and encourage accessibility of coffee shops, cafes, and coffee trucks in more residential areas of the City."^{xvii}

Allowing micro storefront ACUs would complement this resolution by providing a way for coffee shops and cafes to become part of neighborhoods.

[3.2] Inclusionary Commercial Zones

The vibrancy of commercial districts is largely created by family-owned small businesses. Unfortunately, many of these businesses are at risk of being displaced by rising costs and the prevalence of commercial spaces built for large retailers, like department stores. In these areas, the city can offer regulatory carveouts to incentivize the development of small commercial spaces and counteract this displacement.

Many cities use Floor Area Ratio (FAR) to limit the size a building can be in relation to the size of the property. For example, if a city allows a FAR of 3.0, then a building with total square footage up to 3x the size of the lot could be developed (i.e. a three-story building covering the whole lot or a six-story building covering half the lot). See Austin's Zoning Guide for more details on FAR standards.^{xviii}

Austin can incentivize developers to allot space for small businesses by creating a FAR carveout that would allow retail spaces of 1,500 square feet or less to not count toward the building's floor-to-area ratio.

This carveout would allow developers to add extra floor space to be rented or sold without them needing to obtain a zoning variance, exemption, or rezoning.

Faster

RECOMMENDATION 4

Improving the Efficiency and Transparency of Inspections and Applications

[4.1] Revamp Austin's Health Inspection Checklist

Inspections of local businesses can be a headache for both entrepreneurs and city officials. Many cities struggle to hire and retain as many inspectors as they'd like, meaning those they do have on staff are often spread thin. That means scheduling inspections can be a time-intensive and expensive process for business owners, who must ensure that they are onsite and available to assist during the process.

We heard from multiple entrepreneurs that there are a number of opportunities to support both Austin's efforts to ensure inspectors have the resources they need to do their jobs well, and that entrepreneurs have the information they need to run their business safely and effectively.

Austin should adapt their health inspection report into a user-friendly health inspection checklist that provides more information on best practices for food service entrepreneurs.^{xix} Cities Work is already partnering with cities like Philadelphia to create new, streamlined checklists for health inspection forms that are easy to read and understand.^{xx} A similar process in Austin, incorporating feedback from entrepreneurs and entrepreneur support organizations, would ensure that business owners understand what they're responsible for while the inspector is onsite.

See Appendix G for Philadelphia's draft health inspection checklist.

[4.2] Track Permit Approval Timelines and Add a “Shot Clock” for City Departments

For a new entrepreneur, time is money. Every additional day that their opening is delayed because they're waiting on a permit means lost revenue as they continue to pay rent, payroll, or taxes without bringing in any business.

Cities like Denver, San Francisco, and San Diego are trying new ways to speed up permit approvals, including ideas like creating a “shot clock” that limits how much time city departments are legally allowed to take when reviewing permit applications.^{xxi} Austin should consider following suit, setting a reasonable time that a permit application can be in the hands of city staff. At the end of that time period, applications not directly rejected or sent back to the applicant for specific changes can be considered de facto approved, eliminating uncertainty for entrepreneurs.

A good first step would be to track the time Austin currently spends approving each permit and making that information publicly available. Doing so adds transparency and accountability to the business licensing and permitting process and also provides a benchmark for the city to use as it works to improve the regulatory environment for entrepreneurs.

Simpler

RECOMMENDATION 5

Creating a True One-Stop Shop Permit Portal for Entrepreneurs

The first step for many entrepreneurs looking to start a business is simply to type “starting a business in [city name]” in a search engine and going directly to their city’s main business licensing website. What they find on that website can be the difference between a clear, transparent path to securing the licenses and permits they need and watching their dreams of business ownership die in a confusing web of outdated guides, dead links, or conflicting requirements. Despite universal agreement that having a “one-stop shop” portal is important, many cities lack one or more critical components first-time entrepreneurs need to navigate the process.

Cities Work recommends all cities build and maintain a true one-stop shop that does the following:

1. Connects city requirements with processes from other levels of government.
2. Lets entrepreneurs complete forms and registrations through the portal, not through each agency’s own website.
3. Covers all city requirements, not just requirements for getting a business license.
4. Provides a single log-in opportunity so entrepreneurs can organize information and track progress in one location.
5. Guides entrepreneurs effectively through the process.

Currently, Austin’s website covers numbers 1 and 3 reasonably well, but could do more to unify its portal systems and log-ins. Austin could provide additional step-by-step guidance to improve the user experience.

When landing on Austin’s Start a Small Business homepage, Austin entrepreneurs are thankfully met with a number of helpful resources like general instructions about business registration and tax requirements, along with links to free or low-cost classes via BizAid.^{xxii}

Unfortunately, the more detailed the entrepreneur’s needs, the less reliable the website becomes. Once an entrepreneur begins looking for specific permit requirements or application pages, they are directed to the Development Services Department. While it’s understandable that cities want to direct entrepreneurs to reach out and connect with them one-on-one to answer questions, it’s difficult to find out what permits are needed without doing so.

Additionally, permits are scattered across various portals, PDFs, and webpages. Fire alarms require business owners to utilize a specialized Alarm Administration Site login, lamppost and over-the-street banners each have their own permit portal, and most other permits are handled through the “Austin Build + Connect” service. Alcoholic Beverage Permits, on the other hand, require a separate application to be filled out and emailed to a specific city employee. When designing a one-stop shop business licensing and permitting portal, city officials should keep in mind that most new business owners don’t even know where to start. In the words of one entrepreneur: “I can’t figure out if I need permits. I don’t know anyone who has done this, so I don’t know where I fit in.”

[5.1] Add already existing resources to the City’s high-level pages to provide more context and information for entrepreneurs.

Including resources like Texas’s license and permit guide, along with more detailed information about the specific names of forms entrepreneurs need from the Texas Secretary of State’s office would be more helpful than just a link to that agency’s homepage.^{xxiii} As one entrepreneur we spoke with put it, “I want to do this kind of business. What are the requirements in chronological order?” Even if it’s just a few sample business types, concrete examples help entrepreneurs understand where to look for more information.

[5.2] Combine all permits needed for entrepreneurs into a single-log-in portal.

While merging different department IT infrastructure can be challenging for cities, it eliminates the need to track multiple usernames and passwords across multiple sites, giving entrepreneurs a clear view of where they are in the process. Otherwise, individual permits might get lost or forgotten about, leading to delays and frustration for both business owners and city officials down the road.

[5.3] Ensure information about where to go for licensing and permitting information outside of Austin’s city requirements is available upfront.

Currently, entrepreneurs are told to “contact the local county and/or city government in which you plan to conduct business to determine if there are any additional requirements.” While reminding entrepreneurs to check for other county and state level requirements is helpful, and links to Travis County website speed that process along, more details and examples about the kinds of permits or requirements they might expect to find there would be welcome.

[5.4] Clarify which documents are the current versions and which are out of date.

We’ve learned from many entrepreneurs that finding the most up-to-date versions of forms can be a challenge. Part of that is understandable, as Austin maintains transparency by keeping archived or older versions of forms and information available on its websites, but given the confusion, we recommend that Austin work to clarify when a form, document, or information is out of date and archived for transparency purposes, and when it is the version entrepreneurs should use.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Increase Fee Transparency to Make Entrepreneurs' Regulatory Budgets More Realistic

Being able to properly and realistically budget for starting a business is crucial for an entrepreneur's ability to successfully open their doors. Far too often, cities do not have upfront transparency on how much permit and licenses fees will cost, how likely it is for businesses to need reinspections, or how long the estimated review and revision timelines might be.

As we conducted our business process map research, we struggled to determine an estimation of the fee cost. Whether we used the online chat feature, emailed, or called different departments, we were repeatedly told the same thing: they can't estimate how much it would cost unless they have all the project details and that after we submit our application, then they will let us know. Because fees are often project-specific and usually involve multiple departments, it is understandable for a city employee in a department that only accounts for one part of the process to not be able to provide an accurate estimation. However, there must be a way for entrepreneurs to have an idea of how much their project could cost.

[6.1] Permit Navigator Tool

The city of Austin has a "Do I need a permit?" tool which appears to be a permit navigator.^{xxiv} The tool had a planned outage until the middle of October, but unfortunately, it is still not available for use. We cannot see what depth of information the permit tool offers due to this outage, so we are including this recommendation as a best practice with a caveat that the city's tool might have existing capabilities. We recommend the city better advertise the permit navigator tool on their website, so entrepreneurs can easily find it. Additionally, the city should ensure the permit navigator provides an estimated range of applicable fees.

From our research to date, the city of Philadelphia has one of the best examples of a comprehensive permit navigator tool. Philadelphia's Permit Navigator includes customization features that allow for more accurate estimations of required permits, licenses, and associated fees.^{xxv} One change we would like to see in their tool is the ability to estimate a project's fees without needing a specific property address. Currently this tool requires a property address on the second page and will not allow you to continue forward without one. The city should add a "No property address yet" option that allows you to move to the next section and includes a note in the final estimation about how property address affects zoning and land use which can add an estimated range of X to Y in fees.

[6.2] Permitting Piggy Bank Tool

Austin should consider adding an online permitting piggy bank tool. The permitting piggy bank will equip entrepreneurs to create a better, more realistic budget for navigating city requirements. Before ever applying or beginning a process, entrepreneurs can use a fee tool to determine how much their project would cost. They can use this tool to see how much in city fees it would cost to open a business in a variety of situations, such as how much it would cost to open a business on a property that is properly zoned versus on a property that needs a change of use. When ready, the entrepreneur can choose their project's characteristics and obtain an itemized invoice and total cost estimates that will be used for the permitting piggy bank. The permitting piggy bank will allow entrepreneurs to add funds to their piggy bank before starting their project. Similar to how you can select a portion of your salary payment to be automatically sent to a savings or retirement account, entrepreneurs will be able to do this for their permitting piggy bank or add in funds whenever they want. This optional tool will eliminate surprise fees, decrease budgeting uncertainty by tracking all fees in one place, and encourage entrepreneurs to start off in a better position by ensuring their budget covers all fees.

[6.3] Clippy Tool

Another way Austin can promote affordability is to utilize an artificial intelligence “Clippy” tool. As entrepreneurs input their project characteristics into the city’s cost estimation tools, a Clippy tool would pop up with more affordable options. For example, if someone is looking to start a brick-and-mortar food establishment but realizes it might be too expensive, they can ask Clippy for more affordable options. Clippy might suggest beginning with a catering permit, food truck, or special event pop-up. For the entrepreneur who only wants to open a restaurant in a brick-and-mortar space, Clippy can help ensure the entrepreneur understands their undertaking before diving in the deep end. For example, if an entrepreneur wants to open a restaurant in a brick-and-mortar space, they need to obtain a certificate of occupancy which requires the property location to be properly zoned for the desired activity. Rezoning and change of use processes can cost tens of thousands of dollars in fees and delay-costs, and many entrepreneurs have signed property contracts not knowing the property was inappropriately zoned. The cost estimation tool would allow the entrepreneur to put in a potential property’s address, so the entrepreneur can know if they would need to undergo rezoning, change of use, or any other processes before obtaining a certificate of occupancy. If an entrepreneur inputs a property that would require a change of use, Clippy could estimate how much an entrepreneur would save in compliance fees by choosing a property that was last used as a restaurant. Additionally, with proper AI and software integration, Clippy could aggregate all available for-rent or for-sale properties that match the cost-saving criteria.

The city of Austin is in a great position to create a tool like this, as the city currently has other tools with partial capabilities like the Property Profile tool and AB+C public search.^{xxvi}

RECOMMENDATION 7

Remove Unnecessary Steps That Can Lead to Delays and Continually Reform Outdated Processes

Regulatory requirements and processes are often a patchwork of short-term fixes that build up over the years. The people who first implemented the requirement or process may be decades out from having worked for the city, and the ordinances governing the regulatory framework may be similarly outdated. For example, Austin’s start-up process currently requires a final “activation” step to obtain a building permit. While seemingly minimal, it’s an example of an unnecessary step that could be easily and accidentally overlooked by an entrepreneur, while being the kind of process that could easily be automated by the city. Once a permit is approved, there should be no additional steps necessary on the part of the business owner. When asked why the city requires this step, we were met with uncertainty.

The individuals within the city who are often best positioned to understand where bottlenecks arise in the entrepreneurial journey are the city employees who are responsible for administering their respective requirements and procedures. These employees work directly with the entrepreneurs, gaining insight on areas that act as common pain and confusion points for entrepreneurs, and they follow the city’s internal processes for issuing the requirements, knowing first-hand which internal procedures are clunky or make little sense. However, these employees often do not have the power or authority to make the necessary changes to address these issues. By building regular internal review and feedback mechanisms, cities can establish a culture of agency, expertise, and continual improvement.

[7.1] Spring Cleaning Ordinance

The Spring Cleaning ordinance codifies these regular internal review and feedback mechanisms. All teams who are part of the entrepreneurial journey will be required to submit to city council a report of inefficient, confusing, costly, or unnecessary processes, steps, or requirements their

department teams are responsible for administering and solutions that are suggested by the responsible parties. Teams will implement a metric and feedback system to track pain points, bottlenecks, or commonly failed processes and employee-suggested solutions to these issues. The council will go through each report to accept or reject these items, and the items accepted will be added to the annual “spring cleaning” efficiency bill. This can be thought of as similar to a sunset review process conducted at the state level.

All team employees should be encouraged to suggest items and solutions. As the experts in administering their respective processes, their suggestions should be thoughtfully considered. The feedback system should include optional anonymity for employees concerned about speaking up.

In August 2025, the Unified Government of Kansas City, Kansas and Wyandotte County adopted a version of the Spring Cleaning ordinance, and are expecting positive results.^{xxvii}

Please see Appendix H for a Spring Cleaning model ordinance.

Conclusion & Acknowledgements

All cities struggle to strike a balance between protecting health and safety, governing efficiently, and allowing people to realize their full potential. We believe City government has an opportunity to make Austin the leader in regulatory justice for local businesses, and our team is ready to assist the city in achieving this goal.

This work would not have been possible without the amazing people and organizations dedicated to making Austin’s entrepreneurial ecosystem welcoming to the smallest of businesses, from longtime mom-and-pop shop owners to first-time entrepreneurs starting out vending from the back of their car.

We are deeply grateful to the entrepreneurs who shared their time and experiences with us in a commitment to helping future generations and to entrepreneur support organizations who supported us in our research, especially Larissa Davila and the Economic Growth Business Incubator.

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