

# Growing Community Media

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CASE STUDY | JANUARY TO MAY 2025



Northwestern | MEDILL  
Local News Accelerator

# Background

Growing Community Media is a nonprofit media group of four independent local publications covering seven communities on Chicago's West Side and bordering suburbs. It delivers local news online and through weekly print newspapers. The publications have been established for over three decades but together were founded as the nonprofit media group, Growing Community Media, in 2019.

The organization's primary goal in the Medill School of Journalism's Local News Accelerator (LNA) was to grow the audience of one focused community publication, *Austin Weekly News*. Austin is one of the largest neighborhoods in Chicago, located on the far West Side. However, there is little news coverage of this area other than through the *Austin Weekly News*, which provided a great opportunity for growth. In order to grow, the team identified that they needed to learn about the residents in the community and their topics of interest.



The “From/To/To” statement guiding the team’s work was:

From	To	To (future)
Underserving the Austin community due to having a small reach and only having a limited understanding of their information needs.	Improved their digital reach by 200 new newsletter subscribers (a 10% increase) and nearly tripled their Instagram reach from 5K users to 13K users (an increase of 162%) while the publication simultaneously produced online reporting of the Austin community that touched on real estate, local government, local business profiles and food/dining coverage	Continuing their on-the-ground community coverage to expand their content pillars to cover more of the community and invest in paid social advertisement so more readers and community members have access to their coverage.

**Highlights**

Through Growing Community Media’s work in the LNA, they grew their social media engagement by more than 150% and their newsletter subscribers by 10%.

A combination of research findings and business tools and strategies helped position the organization on a path to success. The first hurdle for the team was to understand their audience in Austin. The research revealed not just the demographics of the community, but the preference for news topics, how they consume news and what they would be willing to pay for. Additionally, the LNA provided structure through team exercises forcing the organization to honestly assess where they were starting from. It also helped Growing Community Media define specific goals and organize a strategic plan to meet those goals.



## The process

Growing Community Media's goal at the start of the LNA remained consistent: to grow the audience in the Austin neighborhood. However, at the start, it was unclear who that audience was and how the team would accomplish this.

### *Research insights*

The research Medill conducted brought to light several key elements that helped the team find success in growing social media reach and newsletter subscribers. First, a level of trust in news already existed — 72% of Austin respondents trust local news to “get things right.” Second, the preferred mediums of consuming news are through television, social media and other digital formats. Lastly, news interests of the community included crime, positive news and solutions to problems.

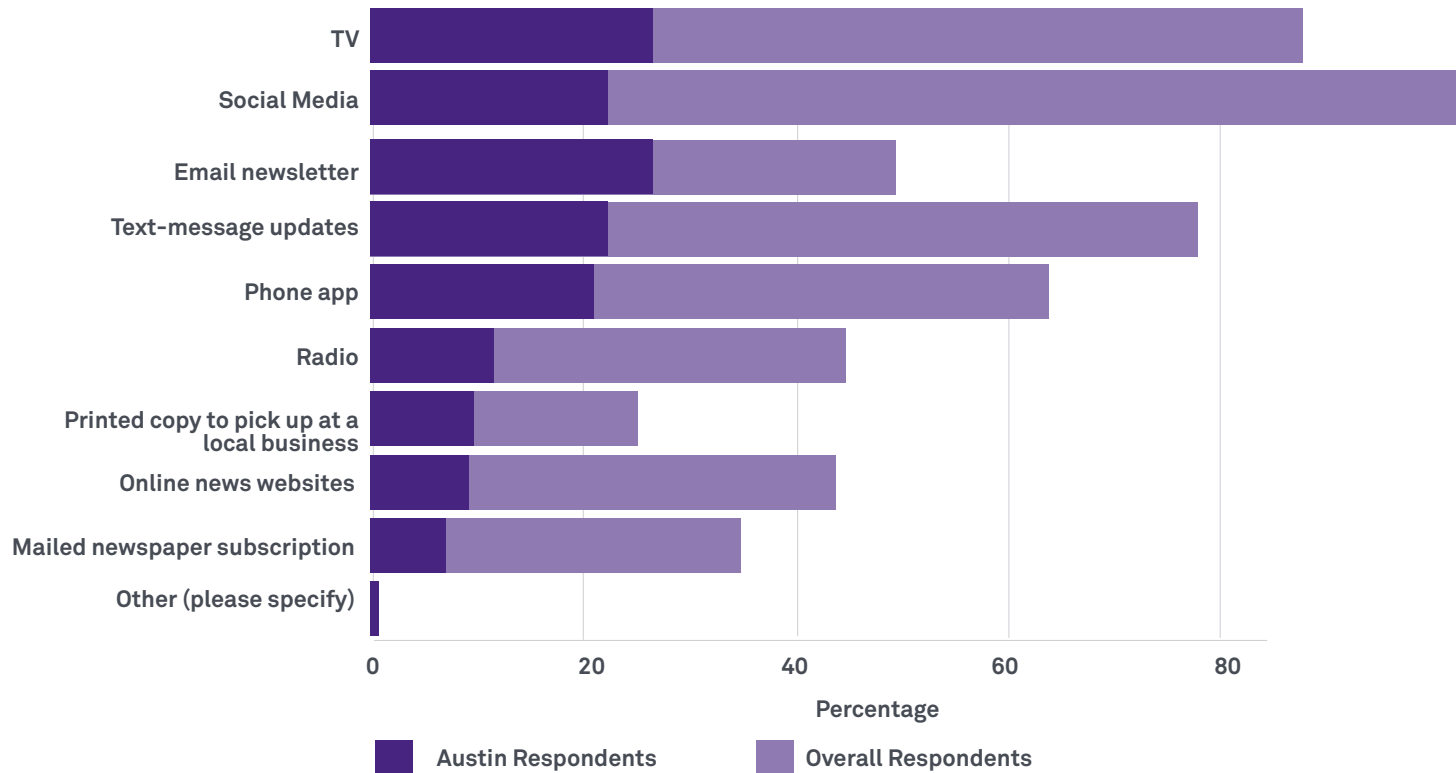
This audience also indicated a willingness to pay for coverage related to food and dining, local government and arts and culture. Knowing this, the team leaned into positive and solutions-focused topics related to the above categories as part of their content strategy.

**“We came in knowing we had shortfalls with our Austin title, but weren’t even sure what that meant,” said Max Reinsdorf, Growing Community Media’s interim executive director. “LNA helped us frame the question, ‘How do we best serve and grow our Austin audience?’”**



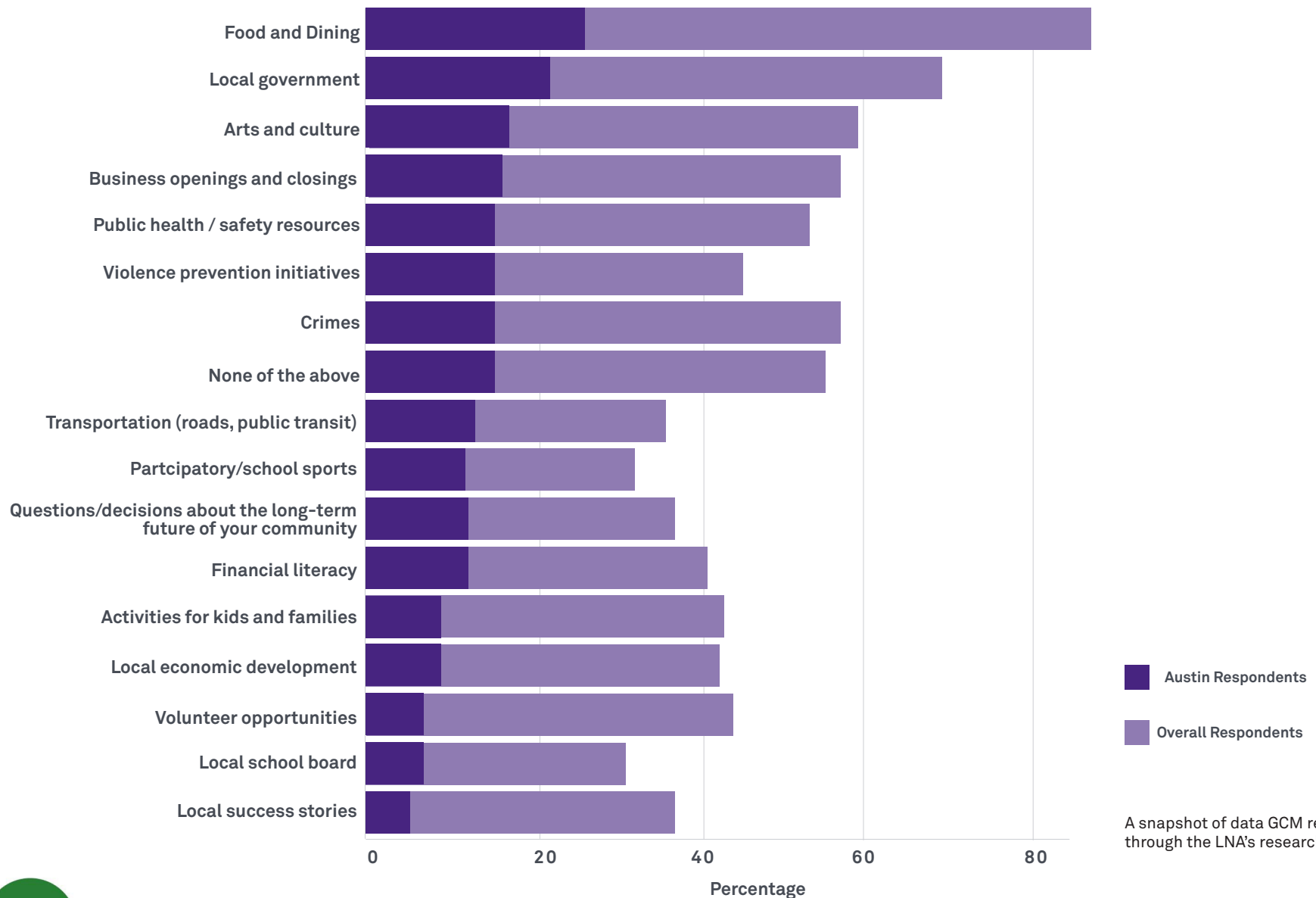
Max Reinsdorf  
Growing Community  
Media's interim executive director

## How Austin respondents would like to receive their community-focused news



A snapshot of data GCM received through the LNA's research.

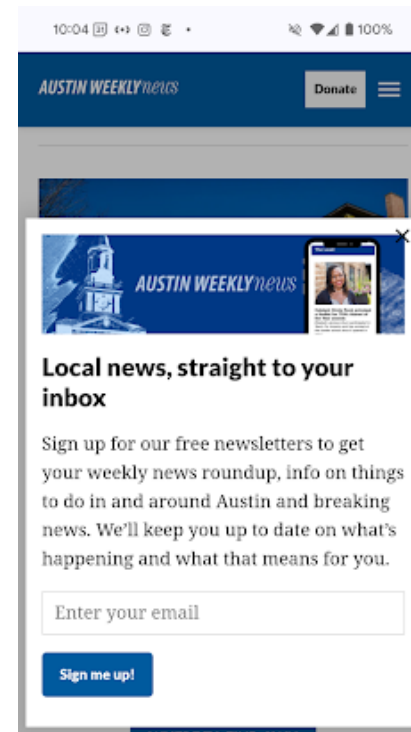
## News content respondents might be willing to pay for



The team subsequently understood what news topics to cover and how to meet the audience where they are, through social media and digital newsletters. The reporter who covered Austin and another community shifted focus to dedicate even more time to Austin stories, aiming to produce at least three pieces of original reporting per week.



On-site newsletter pop-up modal:



**Business strategies and tools**

Using the research as a guide, the tools provided from the LNA including the From/To exercise, North Star and Three-Part Project Statement helped the team clearly lay out strategies to get them to their goals:

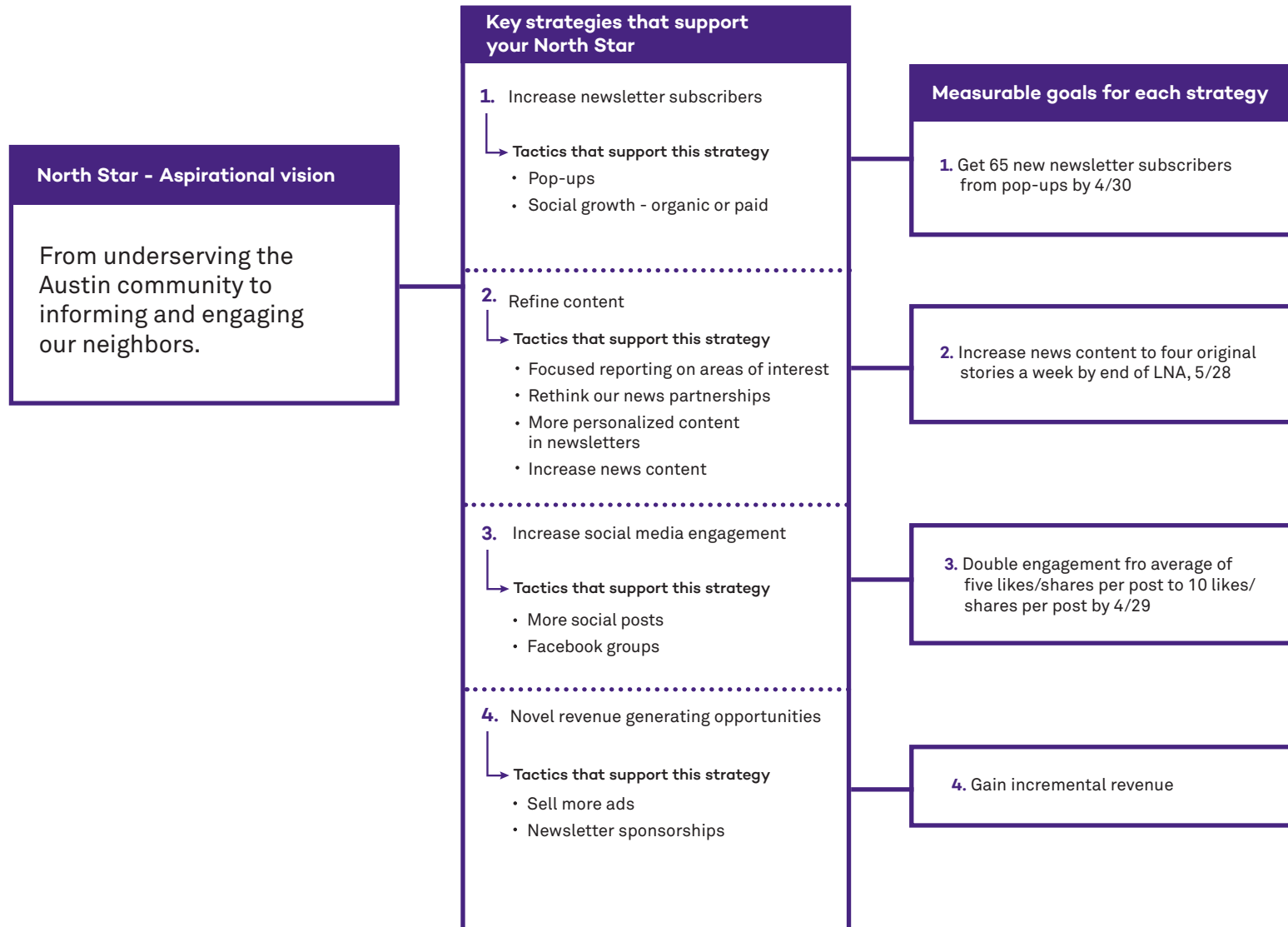
## From/To

Acknowledging the state you're moving FROM, TO a desired better state, reveals gaps and recommends a path forward.

From	To
Not understanding the Austin community	A great understanding of our target audience in Austin
No physical presence	Some physical presence
Rarely breaking news	Break all the news in Austin
Underserving our Austin audience	Superserving our Austin audience
Disconnected from Austin residents, leaders	Strong base of connections, plugged in with residents and leaders
Weak/improvable partnerships	Strong, impactful partnerships
Lacking in content strategy	A refined content strategy
Staff that doesn't represent Austin	Staff that represent Austin



## Three-part project statement



## The results

As a result of the Local News Accelerator, Austin Weekly News increased social media engagement 162% and newsletter subscribers by 10%.

### Social Media

The team began the LNA with little audience reach and engagement on social media. Using the research and data on existing social media posts, the team developed a content strategy specifically focused on Instagram, posting at least one local story per week with original photos. As a result, in nearly five months (Jan. 1 - May 22, 2025) they reached 13,100 users – **an increase of 162%**. This outperformed the total 5,000 users reached over the previous 12 months (Jan. - Dec. 2024). This indicates a clear need for unique local content about Austin, as they more than doubled users reached, in half the time.

### Newsletters

The goal was to increase newsletter subscribers through an on-site pop-up modal campaign. The team found this was effective, but not enough to meet their goals, so they had to pivot. The team found other campaigns to launch, resulting in paid social and in-line article campaigns.

The paid social media campaign acquired 95 newsletter subscribers in just two months. This surprised the team, as it greatly outpaced the other newsletter channels. The team plans to continue this type of campaign as funds allow and expects to see a high return in the short-term. In total, Austin Weekly News newsletter subscribers are up 10% from the beginning of the Accelerator, meaning more neighbors in the Austin community are turning to the publication for their local news.

**Newsletters**

We focused our audience growth efforts on newsletter subscription acquisition through new means.

- Pop-up ads: 97 new subscribers
- Inline asks: 9 new subscribers
- Paid social: 95 new subscribers

**201 new subscribers**

The infographic includes visual elements such as a desktop browser window showing a pop-up modal for Austin Weekly News, a smartphone displaying a social media post with an in-line ask, and a smartphone displaying a social media post with a paid social ad.

## A snapshot of Growing Community Media’s wins

The chart below illustrates the wins Growing Community Media achieved throughout the LNA:

Process	Insight	Capability	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New campaign channels in rotation to acquire newsletter subscribers: paid social and in-line</li> <li>• Weekly Instagram posts with original photos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austin residents read news through social media</li> <li>• Would be willing to pay for food/dining, local government, arts and culture news</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refocused news reporter’s time to increase coverage in Austin</li> <li>• Utilizing a grant to support a dedicated future reporter to Austin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased social media audience reach +162%</li> <li>• Grew newsletter subscribers +10%</li> </ul>



# A Q&A



**Rebecca Meyer, coach:**  
**How did the LNA help Growing Community Media achieve its goals?**



**Max Reinsdorf:**  
LNA helped us by providing resources and, importantly, structure in first framing the questions we need to have answered and then answering them. Meaning — we came in knowing we had shortfalls with our Austin title but weren't even sure what that meant. LNA helped us frame the question, "How do we best serve and grow our Austin audience?" and helped us find the answers. The survey, the bandwidth (e.g., you!) and the sounding boards provided, along with the deadlines and templates that helped structure everything, really made clear what our goals were and how to get there.



**Jessica Mordacq, staff reporter:**  
LNA gave our team the necessary time it took to meet our goals, which are often pushed to the side in daily operations because of capacity restrictions.



**Stacy Coleman, senior audience manager:**  
The LNA helped our team achieve our goals by creating an accountability structure with our meeting times and project deadlines. We had to commit to actually doing the things we set out to do, which can be difficult to stick to with our busy schedules.





**Meyer:**

**What was most helpful for Growing Community Media in helping you achieve the goals you set at the start of the program?**



**Reinsdorf:**

Most helpful: honestly probably the survey. We haven't had clear answers on what our audience is or looks like in Austin for years. Yes, we conduct our own reader surveys, but getting answers from folks you already have relationships with only goes so far. Getting broader perspective from the LNA survey, and not having to execute it (bandwidth!) was great for us.



**Mordacq:**

Also, being held accountable with regular check-ins through the LNA. It gave us an opportunity to reflect on how far we'd come and what's reasonable for us as an organization in the future.



**Meyer:**

**Did your organization have to pivot? If so, what led to the change?**



**Coleman:**

Our organization had to pivot our goals/target audience after receiving our survey data, which drastically differed from our initial assumptions of our audience.



“Meet your neighbors, know their stories”

Timely online reporting **dedicated specifically to the Austin neighborhood** and provide regular updates.

From real estate and nonprofits to local government, food and dining, homeownership and real estate, local business profiles/community features.

