

# City of Houston Ethics, Elections & Council Governance Council Committee

## Proposed City of Houston Elected City Official Social Media Policy

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# Impact of social media

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Social media has revolutionized the ability of its users to share and exchange information, ideas, and views amongst virtual communities and networks; and

Governmental bodies and agencies use social media to educate and provide general information to the public and, in doing so, often foster citizen participation and engagement in discussions concerning matters affecting the general population and current events; and

Elected city officials routinely utilize social media to communicate with their constituents concerning matters affecting Houstonians; and

The use of social media has become an important tool of governance and outreach for elected city officials; and

As community leaders, elected city officials must be mindful of the public trust each holds when using social media to communicate ideas and views amongst their respective social media networks; and

# Proposed City of Houston Elected City Officials' Social Media Policy

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Applies to all elected city officials (the Mayor, the City Controller, and all Council Members)

What is the objective or desired outcome of adopting a social media policy for elected city officials?

To provide elected city officials with:

- 1) Recommended guidelines constituting best practices concerning elected city officials' accuracy, accountability, and sensitivity on social media consistent with elected city officials' commitment to the best interest of the City; and
- 2) Reminders of the laws potentially implicated when elected city official use social media to communicate with constituents concerning matters related to City business.

# Scope of Proposed City of Houston Elected City Officials' Social Media Policy

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The recommended best practices contained in the proposed elected city officials' social media policy can be categorized into three core disciplines:

1. Separate personal and government social media accounts—Clear lines of delineation
2. Accuracy and accountability
3. Sensitivity and impact

# Best Practices: Separate personal and government social media accounts

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Elected city officials should not use social media in a manner that violates the Texas Public Information Act (Chapter 552, Texas Government Code) and any applicable records retention laws or schedules. It is anticipated that from time to time, elected city officials will have access to information that is considered privileged or confidential under Texas or federal law. Such information may be exempt from public disclosure and there may be penalties or other consequences for inappropriate disclosure. By way of example, such information may include but is not limited to certain personnel information, non-public information from criminal investigations and business trade secrets. Elected city officials must be particularly careful to protect against the inadvertent disclosure of confidential or privileged information on social media.

Elected city officials should exercise caution with respect to comments they post, particularly those concerning the City and the business of the City. Elected city officials should be mindful that posting and engaging in a discussion of City-related content/matters on social media may violate the Texas Open Meetings Act (Chapter 551, Texas Government Code).

# Best Practices: Separate personal and government social media accounts

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Elected city officials should not reveal any confidential or privileged information about the City, its constituents, its employees, or its contractors on social media.

Elected city officials should be cautious in using the City seal or City department logos on personal social media sites. Elected city officials must comply with division 3, article IV, chapter 2 of the Houston, Texas, Code of Ordinances when using the City seal or City department logos.

Elected city officials are prohibited under section 255.003 of the Texas Election Code from knowingly authorizing the spending of public funds for political advertising on a social media platform. This includes the use of City resources, such as city staff, city time, and city-owned devices to manage campaign social media accounts or to post communications supporting or opposing a candidate for nomination or election to a public office or office of a political party, a political party, a public officer, or a measure that appears on an internet website.

# Best Practices: Accuracy and Accountability

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Elected city officials should be accurate when posting information on social media, and should quickly correct any mistakes, misstatements and/or factual errors in content upon discovery.

Elected city officials are expected to conduct themselves on all social media platforms in a manner consistent with the City's policies and ethical standards of conduct, including but not limited to Section 18-3 of the City's Code of Ordinances.

Elected city officials should refrain from using social media accounts to communicate with City employees or City volunteers about City-related matters.

Elected city officials must ensure they are not using social media to engage in any activity that uses the official's position or the city's facilities, equipment or supplies for the private gain or advantage of the official or others or uses or attempts to use the official's position to secure special advantage for the official or others.

# Best Practices: Sensitivity and Impact

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The City strives to be professional in its operations and processes. Elected city officials are strongly encouraged to consider the potential impact of social media statements prior to posting, understanding that members of the public who may appear before City Council come from all walks of life. Public comments, in any forum – including on personal and government social media accounts – that contain racial slurs, profane language or acronyms for profane language, express bigotry toward a group based on race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or any other legally protected classification may be considered unbecoming conduct.

Elected city officials should not use government social media accounts to post or share information that is obscene, encourages or promotes illegal activity, or depicts City property, equipment or personnel in any manner that would be considered defamatory or libelous.

Elected city officials should consider whether liking, sharing, retweeting or commenting on any social media posts could be perceived as an endorsement of or about the City, its employees, constituents, other public officials, suppliers, vendors, or contractors.



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Questions?