CITY CONNECTION

Volume 10, Issue 4

January 2014

Calendar

January 2014

1 - City facilities closed

2 - Planning & Zoning Commission - City Hall at 12 p.m.

7 - City Council Meeting at 6:00 p.m.

8 - Heavy Trash & Large Yard Waste

15 - Yard Waste Trimming Collection

16 - Planning & Zoning Commission - City Hall at 5:30 p.m.

21 - City Council Meeting at 6:00 p.m.

22 - Heavy Trash & Large Yard Waste

29 - Yard Waste Trimming Collection

February 2014

4 - City Council Meeting at 6:00 p.m.

5 - Yard Waste Trimming Collection

6 - Planning & Zoning Commission - City Hall at 12 p.m.

12 - Heavy Trash & Large Yard Waste

18 - City Council Meeting at 6:00 p.m.

19 - Yard Waste Trimming Collection

20 - Planning & Zoning Commission - City Hall at 5:30 p.m.

26 - Heavy Trash & Large Yard Waste

Submit requests for Heavy Trash pick-up before noon on Monday, the week of the pick-up at 294-5796.
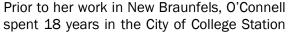
Visit us online at www.huntsvilletx.gov

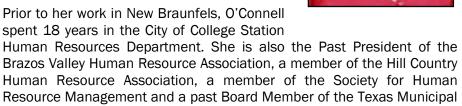## City to welcome new Human Resources Director—Julie O'Connell

The City of Huntsville is excited to announce the impending arrival of Julie O'Connell, who has accepted the position of Human Resources Director. O'Connell, who for the last five years has served as the Human Resources/Civil Service Director for the City of New Braunfels, will start on January 6.

"I'm very excited about coming to Huntsville – I really can't wait to get started in my new role there," she said. "From everything I've talked about with [City Manager Matt Benoit], it seems like I'll be able to do some new and really innovative things that will help both the residents and the employees of the City of Huntsville."

O'Connell holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Texas A&M University, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

Prior to her work in New Braunfels, O'Connell spent 18 years in the City of College Station Human Resources Department. She is also the Past President of the Brazos Valley Human Resource Association, a member of the Hill Country Human Resource Association, a member of the Society for Human Resource Management and a past Board Member of the Texas Municipal Human Resource Management Association.

"We are very excited to welcome Julie to the City of Huntsville," Benoit said. "Her knowledge, experience and perspective will be a welcome addition to our administrative team, and we look forward to working with her."

New year, new newsletter!

Check out "This Week in Huntsville"!

The City's new bi-monthly, digital newsletter is really taking off, with new residents signing up and new features to keep everyone informed.

Never miss an event again - sign up for your free This Week in Huntsville newsletter!

To subscribe, log onto the City's Web site, www.huntsvilletx.gov, click "e-news Subscriptions" on the left-hand side of the page, enter your email address and select "This Week in Huntsville." You'll automatically receive a free, digital newsletter twice each month!

Photos by
Kristin Edwards

Bowling for Charity

City staff raise over $6,500 for local non-profit agencies

During a first-time charity bowling event on Thursday, December 19, the staff of the City of Huntsville raised over $6,600 and collected thousands of food items to benefit local agencies.

The five organizations benefitting from the event include the Rita B. Huff Humane Society, the SAAFE House, the Good Shepherd Mission, the COME Center, and the Senior Center of Walker County.

According to City Manager Matt Benoit, the City staff took the lead on the event in a number of ways, coordinating four-member teams and collecting donations from local businesses and contractors.

"I am so proud of the staff for coming together to contribute their time and money to local charities," Benoit said. "The Huntsville community is more than a paycheck to our employees - they sincerely care about the citizens we serve.

"I've said it at the State of the City Address, and I'll say it again: we at the City have a remarkable group of dedicated employees. They turned a small idea into something really awesome, and they deserve the credit."

Benoit said he hopes to see additional staff-led charity events held in the future.

"Both the level of staff participation and the amount of support they raised made this event an extremely successful effort that we hope to continue in years to come," he said. "I would like to offer a special thanks to the City Council for supporting our events to make this happen."

Dr. Sherry McKibben, Neighborhood Resources Director, said

more than 200 of the City's employees participated in the event. No City funds were used as sponsors paid for all expenses associated with the event.

"Registration for each team cost $40, and employees also purchased raffle tickets for either $1 or one food item each," she said. "Local businesses donated more than $3,300 in raffle items, and during the event, our employees purchased over four hundred raffle tickets.

"Even staff members who chose not to bowl were given the option to bowl by proxy, which gave them a way to provide additional donations. We are very pleased with the outcome of this event, and the City's Directors are very proud of their employees for doing so much to benefit their community."

The staff also participated in a clothing and gift drive for children of City employees who were in need by making an "Angel Tree" available during the Employees' Holiday Luncheon on December 11.

According to Liesa Hackett, who spearheaded the effort along with Tammy Gann, employees were able to select a confidential tag off of the Angel Tree which included the child's age, gender, clothing and shoe sizes, and a gift wish.

"The Angel Tags went really fast – employees were really anxious to help out," Hackett said. "We have a family of employees and they were ready to help and make sure the children of that family will have gifts to open Christmas morning. This effort was such a success, and I think Angel Trees in the years to come will be, as well."

Public Information Act: Guidelines and practices

The City of Huntsville is committed to providing the citizens of Huntsville, as well as the public at large, with information in accordance with the Texas Public Information Act (PIA).

The act, as stated by the Attorney General of Texas, "enshrines Texans' right to access the information that governmental bodies produce—and outlines the process by which the public can request that information and how governmental bodies should respond."

The PIA is activated when a person submits a written request to a governmental body which asks for records or information already in existence at the time of the request.

When the City receives a written request for information, it must (a) provide the responsive documents within the following 10 business days, (b) notify the requestor that the matter has been referred to the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) for a ruling on whether an exception applies, or (c) inform the requestor of the date and time the information will be available, if it will be past the 10-day deadline.

Under the act, a person may ask to view information, get copies of the information, or both. If a request is for copies of information, the governmental body may charge for the copies according to specific rules prescribed by the OAG. Costs may be associated with the materials provided (i.e. paper, maps, etc.), the labor involved in retrieving the documents, or overhead costs.

City of Huntsville statistics

During FY 2012-13, a total of 267 public information requests were submitted to the City of Huntsville through the City Secretary's office. Of those requests, approximately five percent were withdrawn, handled by the Huntsville Police Department or the Municipal Court, or not filled as they were not maintained by the City or were not requests for documents or media.

As explained by City Secretary Lee Woodward, "Requests for information do not activate the PIA, for example, yes or no questions, what/how questions, etc. The act comes into play when a requestor seeks to view or receive copies of existing documents, which may also be other types of media, not only paper."

Requests handled by HPD or the Municipal Court pertain only to records in their possession, some of which may include confidential material that only the requestor is entitled to view.

"All requests submitted to the City should be submitted through the City Secretary's office," Woodward said. "Fulfilling requests for information can often involve more than one department, and proper and timely communication is critical to ensure that all responsive documents are provided."

More than 72 percent of the 267 requests were completed either within one business day or on the same business day they were received, and another 14 percent were completed within two to five business days.

Of the remaining requests, about three percent were completed within six to nine business days, and five percent required the full time allowed for the completion of information requests – 10 days – or additional time to request an opinion from the Attorney General.

Cost estimates

Of the 267 requests filed during FY 12-13, 220 of the requests did not carry a charge as the documents were stored and requested in electronic form and could be provided at no cost. Thirty of the 267 requests were filled at a charge of $1 or less, while 17 were filled at a charge of $1 or more. Of that 17, only seven cost more than $10.

"Sometimes we are asked about the Attorney General's charges for public information. The charges permitted by the state are very minimal compared to the cost to the City of the staff time and work," Woodward said. "We try to make material available on the web and have viewing copies of many things here at City Hall. As we move toward a more paperless office, it is also easier to provide material already saved electronically, also reducing costs to requestors.

"Generally, our requestors are very understanding and we receive primarily positive feedback from them on the speed of our response and the material they receive. We are always happy to visit with anyone about the Public Information Act's provisions and how we can best comply with them."

To review the Public Information Act, visit https://www.oag.state.tx.us/ag_publications/pdfs/publicinfo_hb.pdf.

To submit a request for public information with the City of Huntsville, log onto the City's home page, www.huntsvilletx.gov. From the home page, scroll over "City Government," then scroll over "City Secretary," then select "Public Information Requests" and follow the instructions.

For more information, call the City Secretary's Office at (936) 291-5403.

Remember - Recycle Grease and Antifreeze!

Like many other residential customers, do you plan on replacing the antifreeze in your vehicle this winter? Do you plan on disposing of other kinds of liquids, including motor oil, peanut oil or cooking oil? Don't run those materials down the drain – *recycle them!*

The City of Huntsville Solid Waste Services Department offers free, year-round recycling for these liquids as well as other items for residential customers at the Recycling Drop-Off Center, located at 590 I-45 North from 7:30 a.m. through 5:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Other items, including oil filters, are recycled in specifically marked collection barrels. As they are flammable, neither gasoline nor diesel from lawn equipment or vehicles will be accepted for disposal or recycling.

Unfortunately, due to disposal restrictions, the Solid Waste Services Department is not able to pick up liquids on a curbside basis. If you have any questions, please call 936-294-5743.

City of Huntsville residential customers: It's time to "winterize" your sewer charge

Water meter usage for the months of November through February is used to calculate your new sewer average charge for the next year. Consciously reducing your water usage during these months could lower your sewer charge. Methods to reduce usage include limiting or completely eliminating outside watering. The new sewer average charge will be effective with the April billing (due in May).

"Basically, the City of Huntsville would just like to advise residents to curtail any kind of outdoor watering, such as washing cars, in order to keep water consumption down during winter months," said Jerri Weaver, City of Huntsville Billing and Revenue Manager. "Also, residents should be aware of any water leaks and make sure to have those repaired."

For more information, contact City of Huntsville Utility Billing at (936) 291-5431.

Composting tips – Decrease yard waste and nourish your lawn

Submitted by guest columnist Natalie Mimms, Assistant Solid Waste Superintendent

Don't bag it-compost it! With a little time and ingenuity you can create your own safe and nutrient rich compost that will nourish your lawn and landscape plants, as well as reduce your need for watering. When you have yard waste, consider putting it in a compost pile instead of a bag that will be hauled off to the landfill. It's simple, and if you ask any avid gardener, it is worth the effort. There are six major ingredients in a compost pile

1. Nitrogen – this is all your waste that is green, like grass clippings, leaf trimmings, and kitchen scraps (stay away from meat and dairy scraps, they tend to stink and attract critters).
2. Carbon – this is all your waste that is brown, like leaves, chipped up limbs, and thatch from the lawn.
3. Micro-organisms – these are the bugs that will turn your pile into a dark fertile nutrient filled pile. These are found in soil, water, plant surfaces, pretty much everywhere.
4. Water – every living organism needs water to grow.
5. Air – the type of micro-organism that will turn a pile of yard waste into a pile of compost quickly needs air.
6. TIME!

There are many different styles to developing a compost pile, and all of them will eventually lead to compost. You can go with the less-structured route of putting everything in a heap in one spot and walk away from it and forget it, or go with more advanced systems with cages, boxes or tumblers. No matter what type of system you go with, the principles of decomposition are all the same. You have to have a balance of the six ingredients in order for the magic to happen! The better your balance is, the faster it happens. Don't worry about getting it exactly right; no matter what you do, it will eventually break down. I suggest following these steps:

You need equal weight of carbon ingredients and nitrogen ingredients. This is where it seems a little complicated, but it really isn't so bad. Dried leaves are very light, so you need a lot more dried leaves that you need green leaves, kitchen scraps, or grass clippings. This is great news since fall is here and everyone has an abundant amount of dried leaves.

You need your pile to stay damp all the way through. Not sopping wet or you will drown your organisms, but not dry or the organisms won't be happy either. Aim for a balance similar to a rung out sponge.

Your pile needs to be fluffy, so air can get in to the organisms. Often this is done by turning over your pile once every couple of weeks with a pitch fork or a rake. Having different types of items in your pile will keep things from matting down, like shredded leaves, tiny sticks and pine needles, kitchen scraps like lettuce, apple peels, old flower stems, and grass clippings all will allow air to flow through the pile. The smaller the items in your pile, the faster they will decompose, so put items in a chipper or blender if you want to have a fast pile. A great way to shred bags and bags of dried leaves quickly is to put them inside of an old trash can, take your yard string trimmer and stick it in the can, and turn it on. It's like a giant blender and turns the leaves into tiny bits in seconds!

Finally, all you have to do is wait. If you are very diligent with you pile and keep everything about it perfect, you can have fresh compost in a couple of months. If you are the type of person that prefers a more laid back method of putting it all in a pile and walking away from it and never looking at it again, you can have compost in about a year or two. There's not really a wrong way to do it, and it keeps the green waste out of the landfills.

Once your compost is ready, spread it around! Sprinkle it in your lawn, lay it down around the base of your bushes and trees, or put it in all your flower beds. The compost will deter weeds, add organic matter to your soil which will help with water retention, and will slowly release nutrients to the plants and surrounding soil that will help make everything healthy and strong.