



Houston Association Partners With Mayor to Launch New App on City Website—January 2014

The idea struck Dana Kervin, Chief Political Strategist of the Houston Association of REALTORS® [HAR], while she was on the treadmill watching CNN. "There was Jennifer Pahlka, the founder of Code for America, talking about how she and her team of geeks had been able to connect the public with government, reducing time, effort, and expense," explains Kervin. "I thought, 'We could do that! Our award-winning Web Department can connect HAR members with our City of Houston government and elected officials!'"

It would have remained nothing more than an idea, she notes, had her colleagues at HAR not been excited -- and ignited it. Sending the CNN link to HAR President & CEO Bob Hale; to Taqi Rizvi, HAR's Chief Technology Officer; to Legislative and Policy Analyst Dennis Blanchard; and to Houston's extremely tech-savvy mayor, Annise Parker -- who has a whopping 26,000 citizens following her tweets -- Kervin was bowled over by the enthusiastic response.

With lots of hard work supported by a \$25,000 Game Changer grant from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, HAR had its "Houston Living" app up-and-running about seven months later. Mayor Parker, accompanied by HAR Chair-Elect Chaille Ralph, unveiled the app at a press conference held at City Hall on October 2. Houston Living is the only app displayed on the City of Houston website, besides the city's own "311 information" and water bill apps. Rizvi is proud to note that Houston Living had been downloaded by over 1,600 users in two months.

And what exactly does Houston Living provide Houston citizens? It offers one-stop, instant access to information about city government, local amenities and events, real estate and more. "We sat around in meetings, simply brainstorming what would be helpful and useful to people living in Houston, or those investigating the possibility of living here," says Blanchard. "The goal was to connect the public with the services and amenities they need most, plus the personalities of government. Houston Living connects you to libraries, parks, schools, events, real estate listings, and city officials. Because the app is organic in nature, we can add features as we go."

Such a live and timely data-rich app is costly to maintain, and HAR will be absorbing that expense in order to continue providing the app to Houston free-of-charge. Even so, the effort has paid off in spades.

"Mayor Parker spoke so glowingly of our organization when she unveiled Houston Living, and it made us all so proud," says Kervin. "The REALTOR®



image here in Houston is now one of innovation and service. We're represented right there on the city's homepage in partnership with our progressive, pro-active, pro-technology mayor. Using the Houston Living app keeps me in touch with Mayor Parker's tweets, which have included a couple of shout-outs for HAR and the app.

HAR members have embraced "their" product whole-heartedly, sending the app to clients as a courtesy, after closings. Kervin has heard from fellow government affairs colleagues in associations beyond the Texas border who are excited about what HAR has accomplished with the app. The nature of NAR's Game Changer grant program requires that a project be widely replicable, as well as innovative, so HAR may well be at the forefront of a national trend.

Rizvi, the technology lead on the Houston Living app, credits Kervin with making it happen. "You can have a great idea -- which Dana did -- but having strong existing relationships with the higher-ups in the city government was key. One day, we were having a meeting with Mayor Parker about the feasibility of such a project, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in the mayor's chair, demonstrating the app!"

To learn more about how the REALTORS® of Houston are connecting citizens to their government, contact Chief Political Strategist Dana Kervin, at dana@har.com or 713.629.1900 x 223.



Mayor Annise Parker (left) and HAR Chair-Elect Chaille Ralph (right) demonstrate the Houston Living App at Mayor Parker's press conference held at City Hall. Joining in the press conference were HAR members, Governmental Affairs and Web Department staff who were involved in the app's development, and key mayoral staff members.



Following the demonstration of the Houston Living App in Mayor Annise Parker's office, Mayor Parker (center-left) poses with (left to right) HAR's Dennis Blanchard, Justin Nguyen, Erick Del Orbe, Taqi Rizvi, and Dana Kervin