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TEXAS MUNICIPAL COURT GUIDE

Texas Municipal Court Guide for Residents

Plain-language guide for Texas residents on reading a citation, appearing in municipal court, paying or contesting tickets, deferred disposition, driving safety courses, ability to pay, license renewal holds, and court records-with links to official sources.

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Plain-language guide for Texas residents on traffic citations, municipal court appearances, fines, deferred disposition, driving safety courses, ability to pay, FTA/FTP renewal holds, and court records.

About this guide

Most traffic tickets and many city ordinance violations in Texas are Class C misdemeanors heard in a municipal court (or sometimes a justice court, depending on where the offense occurred). This guide explains what residents commonly need to know about citations, court appearances, fines, and compliance.

For police reports, crash reports (CR-3), or open records requests to a police department, see the companion Texas Police Records Guide for Residents.

Statutory note (2025 recodification)

Effective January 1, 2025, most justice and municipal court procedures appear in Code of Criminal Procedure Chapter 45A, adopted by H.B. 4504 (88th Legislature). Older Chapter 45 citations you may see on old websites are largely repealed or renumbered-use Chapter 45A when reading current law.

Bill text: H.B. 4504 (enrolled)

Current chapter: CCP Chapter 45A

Important: This page is general information, not legal advice. Each court sets its own local procedures, office hours, and payment methods. Always follow the instructions on your citation and contact the municipal court clerk listed on that document.

Which court handles your case

- Municipal court - offenses within a city's jurisdiction (most city traffic and ordinance tickets).
- Justice court - some Class C matters outside city limits or in unincorporated areas.

Your citation, summons, or court notice should name the court, address, phone number, and appearance date or answer deadline. That court is your starting point.

General background: About Texas Courts

Read your citation and appearance date

Before you pay, contest, or request a driving safety course, read the entire citation or notice. It should include:

- The offense charged

- The answer date or deadline to respond (for qualifying traffic offenses, the citation must include driving safety course notice language under Art. 45A.354; other required citation content appears elsewhere in Chapter 45A)
- The court name and contact information

Do not ignore the appearance date. Missing a court date can lead to additional enforcement, including arrest warrants under Art. 45A.104 and driver license renewal denial under Transportation Code Chapter 706 (see below).

Paying a fine

Many courts accept payment online, by mail, or in person. Ask the clerk:

- Whether payment counts as a conviction for your offense
- Whether court costs and fees are included in the amount due
- How the court reports the disposition to DPS for driving-record purposes

Pay only through official court channels listed on your citation-not third-party websites unless the court identifies them as authorized.

Entering a plea

You generally must appear (in person or as the court allows) and enter a plea under Art. 45A.151 and related articles. Common pleas:

Plea	In general terms
Guilty	You admit the offense; the court proceeds to judgment and sentencing (fine, costs, conditions).
No contest (nolo contendere)	You do not contest the charge; the court may find you guilty and sentence you.
Not guilty	You deny guilt; the court schedules further proceedings, often a trial.

Your court clerk can explain how appearances work locally (payment window vs. scheduled docket).

Trial before the court or jury

Bench trial (judge)

If you plead not guilty, the state must prove its case. Many Class C trials are heard by the judge without a jury.

Jury trial

Defendants in criminal cases have a right to trial by jury. In justice and municipal courts, jury procedures include:

- Jury waiver - Art. 45A.155
- Summoning a jury (six jurors) - Art. 45A.156
- Failure to appear for jury trial (reimbursement fee) - Art. 45A.157
- Jury selection and formation - Art. 45A.159

Ask the clerk how to request a jury trial and whether a written jury demand or fee applies locally.

Deferred disposition

Deferred disposition allows the court to accept a plea, defer further proceedings for up to 180 days, and impose conditions instead of immediately entering a final adjudication of guilt.

- Core authority - Art. 45A.302
- Requirements and fees - Arts. 45A.303-45A.304
- Dismissal after compliance - Art. 45A.305
- Show-cause if you violate conditions - Arts. 45A.306-45A.307

A deferral fine may be imposed when the order is issued (Art. 45A.302(b)-(c)). Eligibility depends on the offense, your record, and local court policy. Ask the clerk before you enter a plea.

Driving safety course (ticket dismissal)

For many qualifying traffic offenses, Subchapter H of Chapter 45A (Arts. 45A.351-45A.359) allows dismissal after completion of a driving safety course approved by the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (or an approved motorcycle operator course when applicable).

Key statutes:

- Eligibility and request - Art. 45A.352
- Offenses that qualify / exclusions - Art. 45A.353 (includes exclusions such as certain high-speed violations listed in the statute)
- 90-day period to complete course and file proof - Art. 45A.356
- Effect on driving record when dismissed - Art. 45A.357

Common requirements under Art. 45A.352 include: qualifying offense; guilty or no contest plea; request by the answer date on your notice; valid Texas driver's license or permit (or qualifying military status); proof of financial responsibility; and no driving safety course within the prior 12 months (with exceptions in the statute).

TMCEC training materials describe practical court steps for driving safety course (DSC) requests; your court clerk applies the statute to your citation.

TMCEC resource: Municipal Juvenile/Minor Chart (2026) (also covers minor alcohol/tobacco procedures-not identical to DSC, but useful for minor defendants).

If you cannot afford fines and costs

Texas law requires courts to consider whether defendants can pay.

Ability-to-pay inquiry

During or immediately after sentencing when you entered a plea in open court, the judge must inquire whether you can pay fines and costs and must consider alternatives if you cannot pay immediately:

- Art. 45A.252 - Sufficiency of resources to pay fines or costs
- Art. 45A.253 - Payment plans and related discharging methods

- Art. 45A.254 - Community service to satisfy fines or costs
- Art. 45A.257 - Waiver of payment when allowed

Tell the clerk if you cannot pay on the due date. Do not assume the court knows your situation unless you ask.

Missing a court date, warrants, and license renewal holds

Arrest warrants for failure to appear

A court generally may not issue an arrest warrant for missing only the first court setting until it provides written notice with a new appearance date within 30 days, information about payment alternatives, and other required content, and you still fail to appear - see Art. 45A.104(e).

If you voluntarily appear to resolve a warrant, the court shall recall the warrant under Art. 45A.104(g) when you make a good-faith effort before execution.

Failure to pay after conviction (capias pro fine)

If you were convicted and do not pay as ordered, the court may issue a capias pro fine under Art. 45A.259, but must hold a hearing on undue hardship before certain enforcement steps (Art. 45A.259(d)-(f)).

DPS Failure to Appear / Failure to Pay (OmniBase) program

Under Transportation Code Chapter 706, courts may report unresolved citations or unpaid judgments. DPS may deny renewal of your Texas driver license until the reporting court clears the record.

DPS states:

- Resolve each case with the court that reported it.
- This is a renewal denial program-read DPS materials carefully; it is not the same as every type of license suspension.
- After the court reports clearance, DPS commonly describes several business days before your driver record updates.

Official DPS resources:

- Failure to Appear/Failure to Pay Program
- FTA/FTP FAQ (Section 8)

DPS links to the Failure to Appear/Failure to Pay status tool (maintained for DPS by OmniBase Services).
OmniBase citizen line: 1-800-686-0570.

Juveniles and minors in municipal court

Special rules apply when a child or minor is charged. TMCEC's chart summarizes common municipal court distinctions between children, minors, and adults.

Pleas and parent appearance

Art. 45A.452 requires, for qualifying young defendants:

- Plea taken in open court

- Summons to a parent, guardian, or managing conservator to be present for the plea and other proceedings (with exceptions if the parent cannot be found)
- Warning that a parent's failure to appear may be a Class C misdemeanor (Art. 45A.452(e))

Limits on jailing children; license sanctions

Art. 45A.461 limits confinement of a child for failure to pay fines or failure to appear and authorizes certain DPS driver license suspension or denial remedies for contempt after notice and hearing.

Confidentiality of certain child records

Art. 45A.462 makes many fine-only misdemeanor records relating to a child defendant confidential and not disclosable to the public (with listed exceptions for courts, criminal justice agencies, DPS, attorneys, and the child/parent).

TMCEC: Municipal Juvenile/Minor Chart (2026)

Getting copies of court records

Courts are not under the Texas Public Information Act

Access to information held by the judiciary is governed by other law and court rules, not the Public Information Act. See Texas Government Code § 552.0035.

The Texas Judicial Branch explains that courts are generally not subject to the PIA and that access to many non-case judicial records is governed by Rule 12 of the Texas Rules of Judicial Administration. See Texas Courts Open Records Policy.

Case records vs. judicial administrative records

- Case records (documents filed in a specific case) are generally not "judicial records" under Rule 12 because they are created in connection with a matter before the court.
- Rule 12 applies to certain administrative records of courts and judicial agencies-not the case file itself.

What residents usually do

To obtain a copy of a judgment, disposition, or court document in your case:

1. Contact the municipal court clerk where the case was filed.
2. Ask what form to use, fees (if any), and whether you must appear with ID.

Do not send a Texas Public Information Act request to a municipal court expecting police-style open records treatment-the clerk will route you under court rules or local policy.

Questions to ask your municipal court clerk

1. What is my answer date, and may I respond online, by mail, or in person?
2. What are my options: pay, plead not guilty, deferred disposition (Art. 45A.302), or driving safety course (Art. 45A.352)?

3. Does this offense qualify for deferred disposition or DSC dismissal under Art. 45A.353?
4. What documents must I file (insurance, driver's license, driving record, course certificate)?
5. What is the total fine, costs, and fees if I pay today?
6. If I cannot pay in full, may I request a payment plan or community service under Arts. 45A.252-45A.254?
7. How do I request a jury trial?
8. What happens if I miss my court date under Art. 45A.104?
9. Is there an FTA/FTP hold on my driver license, and how do I clear it after I comply?
10. For a juvenile defendant, when must a parent appear under Art. 45A.452?
11. How do I obtain a copy of the court judgment or disposition in my case?

Frequently asked questions

Can I just pay online and skip court?

Some courts allow payment without appearance for certain offenses; others require a personal appearance or plea first. Follow your citation and the clerk's instructions.

What is the difference between deferred disposition and a driving safety course?

Deferred disposition (Art. 45A.302) is probation with conditions after a plea. Driving safety course dismissal (Subchapter H, Art. 45A.352) is a specific statutory dismissal path for qualifying traffic offenses. They are not interchangeable-ask which fits your citation.

How long do I have to complete a driving safety course?

Under Art. 45A.356, the court typically allows a 90-day period after your plea to complete the course and file required documents-unless the court grants an extension for good cause (Art. 45A.355).

I paid the court but still cannot renew my license.

Courts must report clearance to the FTA/FTP system. DPS advises it can take several business days after the court updates the record. See DPS FTA/FTP FAQ.

Can I use the Public Information Act to get my court file?

Generally no for municipal court case records. Use the court clerk and § 552.0035 and Rule 12 as explained on the Texas Courts open records policy page.

Where do I get a police offense report for the same incident?

Request the report from the police department under the Public Information Act. See the Texas Police Records Guide for Residents.

Disclaimer

This guide is not legal advice. Statutes, court rules, and local procedures change. Municipal courts in different cities use different systems, fees, and docket practices.

For criminal consequences, license actions outside the FTA/FTP renewal context, occupational licenses, or appeals, consult a qualified attorney or the court clerk for your case.

For agencies: link to this guide

Suggested anchor text: Texas municipal court guide for residents.

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  For a plain-language overview of traffic citations, court appearances, fines,
  and driver license renewal holds in Texas municipal court, see
  <a href="https://thinline.software/resources/texas-municipal-court-guide">
    Texas municipal court guide for residents
  </a>
  (general information; not legal advice).
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