Planning the City in the New Economy: Comprehensive Planning in Austin, Texas

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Austin, TX, exemplifies many challenges in planning for fast-growing Sun Belt cities. The process to create the recently adopted Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan shows the difficulty in matching the tools of traditional comprehensive plans with interrelated New Economy issues and best practices in community engagement.

Fast-growing Austin, Texas, is at the center of a number of trends facing cities across the country. The rise of high tech and other knowledge-based industries, the return to the city of high- and middle-income families, and the rise of the consumer city based around access to amenities have all played out in Austin over the last two decades. In 2009, the City set out to update its decades-old comprehensive plan. The ambitious two-year process, called "Imagine Austin," was driven by community engagement. The process sought to address some limits of the traditional comprehensive plan and planning process in grappling with problems of the New Economy.

Planning Powers in Austin

Since 1985, Austin's City Charter gives the city's comprehensive plan a central role in city decision-making. It represents the City Council's policies on growth, development, and land use. With a prior plan adopted in 1979 and specifically grandfathered under the 1985 Charter, that power was never used.

According to the City Charter, the City Council must adopt a comprehensive plan by ordinance that contains its "policies for growth, development and beautification of the land within the corporate limits and the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the city." The plan must address ten elements: (1) a future land use element; (2) a traffic circulation and mass transit element; (3) a wastewater, solid waste, drainage and potable water element; (4) a conservation and environmental resources element; (5) a recreation and open space element; (6) a housing element; (7) a public services and facilities element, which shall include but not be limited to a capital improvement program; (8) a public buildings and related facilities element; (9) an economic element for commercial and industrial development and redevelopment; and (10) health and human service element. The charter specifically calls for coordinated and internally consistent elements. Once adopted, "all land development regulations including zoning and map, subdivision regulations, roadway plan, all public improvements, public facilities, public utilities projects and all city regulatory actions relating to land use, subdivision and development approval shall be consistent" with the plan.

Rapid growth, combined with strong public concerns over the character and location of that growth, requires a clear consensus vision for growth management using the tools of the plan.

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Trends Shaping Cities in the New Economy

Austin is part of the extremely fast-growing "Texas Triangle." The junior member of a massive region anchored by Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Antonio, Austin regularly appears at the top of national lists on fastest growing cities, for both population and economy. It also regularly tops "best" lists for quality of life, for the city as a whole, or for a bewildering array of benefits for particular segments of the population (best city for dog-owners, best city for singles, and the like).

Despite these plaudits, Austin struggles to manage its population growth. Built along two north-south routes (I-35 and Texas Route 1/MoPac) with limited east-west access in the urban core, Austin is awash in traffic. While the central city and southwest feature weekly fights over development, suburbs continue to bloom, both within Austin city limits and beyond its jurisdiction.

Austin's present and future housing markets and built environment will be driven by two key trends: the changing market demand for housing and income inequality.

**Changing Market Demand for Housing**

Across the country, the enormous Baby Boomer cohort born after World War II is beginning to retire and downsize. In the next twenty years, more than 300,000 Baby Boomers in Central Texas are expected to shift from larger, family-oriented homes (generally, detached with larger yards) to smaller structures, attached or with smaller yards.

The rising generations of Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995) and Millennials (born between 1995 and 2010) are showing marked differences from preceding generations, through a mix of attitudinal and situational factors. Growing environmental concerns, coming of age after the steep declines in crime of the late 1990s and 2000s, and the widespread availability of the mobile internet leave many younger adults showing a stronger interest in city living. At the same time, higher gas prices, tighter lending markets, and a two-tiered labor market with a greater premium for highly skilled workers nudges many younger people to renting and smaller home sizes.

Austin is also becoming more diverse, with fast-growing Hispanic and Asian communities. In 2007, Austin was just barely a majority-minority city. The share of Austin's non-Hispanic white population will continue to decline (even while it grows in absolute numbers). Regionally, Central Texas' black population will grow modestly, though currently African American Austinites are relocating away from the city to surrounding suburbs.

These trends are driving up demand for urban neighborhoods that are walkable and well-served by transit. Property values in these neighborhoods are increasing dramatically, with many existing residents priced out.
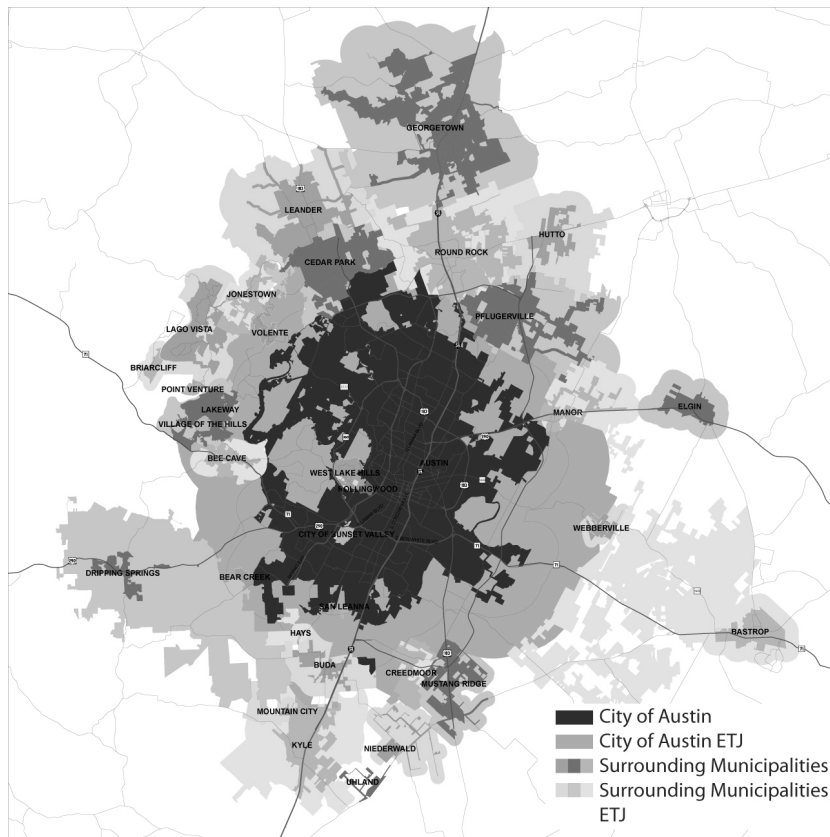

The Planning Area: Imagine Austin addressed the City of Austin and its annexable land (called the Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction). Here, the planning area is shown in regional context with surrounding jurisdictions with their Extra-Territorial Jurisdictions.
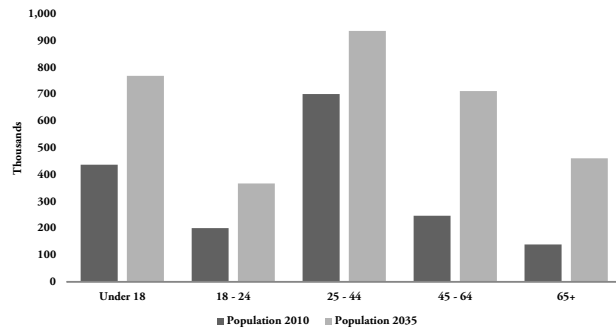
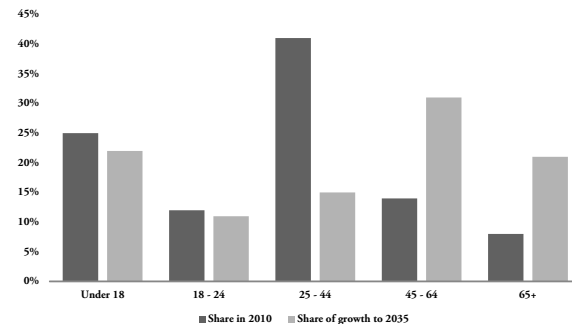**Population by Race/Ethnicity in the Austin Region, 2010 and 2035**
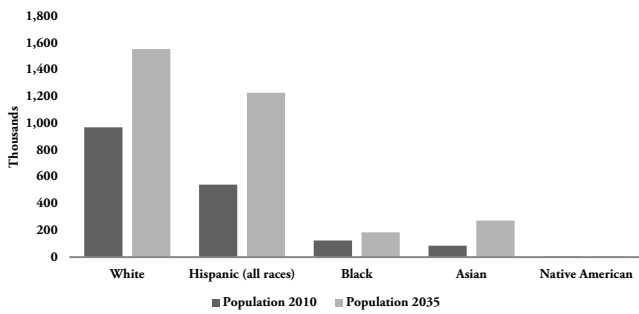
Population Share by Race/Ethnicity in the Austin Region, 2010 and 2035
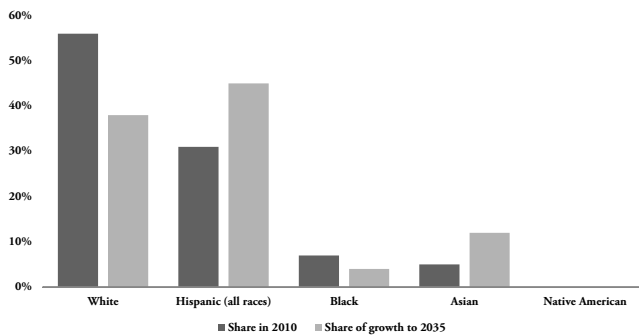
Age Demographics in the Austin Region, 2010 and 2035

Population Share by Age in the Austin Region, 2010 and 2035

Economic Inequality

Austin's economy has grown quickly over the last decade, adding more jobs and especially more high wage jobs. Austin routinely has a lower unemployment rate than the rest of Texas or the United States. However, access to Austin's prosperity is uneven. For example, African Americans are unemployed at about twice the rate of the rest of the city. People with a high school degree or G.E.D. have an unemployment rate of 14%; the comparable figure for people with a bachelor's degree is 4.6%.

Despite Austin's growth, and in line with trends across the country, median wages have stagnated. Wages for African American and Hispanic households have actually declined. Meanwhile, over roughly the same time period, the median sales prices for homes (attached and detached) in Austin grew from $119,000 in 1997 to $269,000 in 2013.

The rise in inequality is one of the defining, contested issues of our time. Cities have responded by seeking to address real or perceived skills gaps to better match existing and new workers with medium and high skill jobs. Some cities have also sought, and occasionally instituted, a higher local minimum wage. Another widespread concern is prisoner re-entry into the workforce. As record numbers of Texas prisoners re-enter the labor market, they find themselves blocked from many opportunities for employment.

Austin is caught in these two pincers: limited supply compared with a sudden shift in housing demand sending the price of housing in the city up, and stagnating incomes for middle and working class households.

The comprehensive plan, with its focus on the built environment, is equipped for only one side of this dilemma. While many comprehensive plans, including Imagine Austin, have guidance on raising incomes, these recommendations are often peripheral to these plans' core powers. This leaves them with an unclear and often ineffective path to implementation.

Change in Median Household Income by Race/Ethnicity, 2000 to 2013
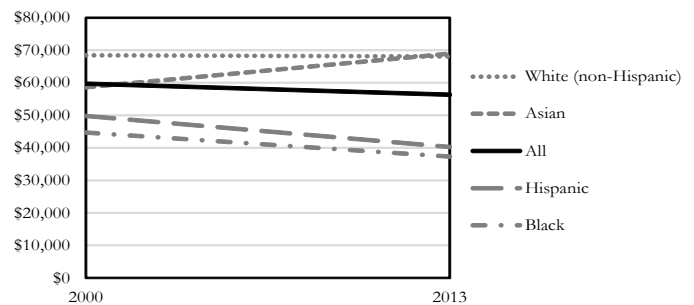
Planning Processes for the New Economy

As Imagine Austin was taking shape, City Council, Planning Commission, activists, and planners all agreed on the central importance of public input to creating the plan. Planners held a public participation workshop, asking the community to identify goals and tools for the participation process.

The final process was structured into four Community Forum Series. Each was built around a public meeting, with extensions for participation beyond those meetings.

- Community Forum Series #1 was built around broad, visionary, open-ended questions about what should be preserved and improved about Austin and what participants wanted for the future.
- Community Forum Series #2 had two parts: a growth mapping exercise for the public meeting paired with a review of vision statements based on public input.
- Community Forum Series #3 presented four alternate growth scenarios for the public to rate.
- Community Forum Series #4 presented the draft plan and invited the public to set priorities for implementation.

Woven throughout the phases was technical data, archived as reports, and studies on the plan's website. During the first Community Forum Series, a Community Inventory was published. It contained eleven chapters with data on current conditions and trends on topics covered by the plan. Prior to the growth mapping meetings, a land use and transportation model was assembled and presented to establish baseline conditions for the alternate scenarios. Those scenarios, in turn, projected conditions forward to 2039 and were used to help the public understand the ramifications of the alternate scenarios. When the Growth Concept Map was presented with the draft plan, an assessment of infrastructure savings and tax implications was also presented.

Having a process open to all was one of the guiding principles of community engagement. Planners and community members recognized that this required having multiple ways to participate. Repeatedly, participants stressed that public meetings were insufficient. The demographic results from the Participation Workshop showed this starkly. Participants were asked to place dots that represented them across multiple demographic questions, which were arranged as pie charts showing the overall citywide breakdown for each category. Despite representation from across the city and racial and ethnic diversity, nearly every participant had a bachelor's degree or higher.
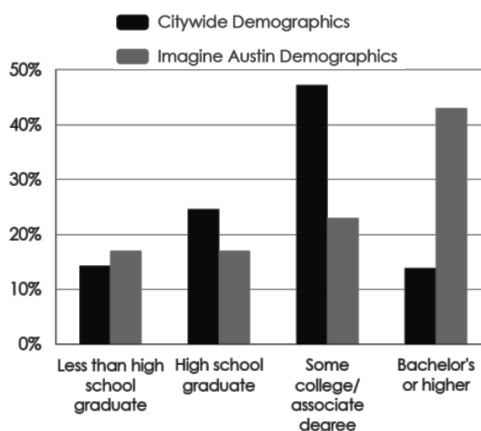
Imagine Austin demographics. Source: Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan, Appendix B.

The planning team developed a number of tools to get beyond public meetings, whenever possible:

- Online surveys, including some developed by the City of Austin's Information Technology Service Department, which gave substantially more control over the kind of questions than are available in most off-the-shelf software;
- Meetings-in-a-Box, in which a person or group checked out meeting materials to host their own meeting at their convenience with a neighborhood or business group, non-profit, or simply with a group of friends and return the results to planners; and
- Speak Week, in which the planning team set up booths at high traffic areas and invited participation on the spot. While surveys were available, the team also focused on developing new approaches such as dot voting posters that allowed participants to see their answers in context.

The Imagine Austin process occurred alongside other innovations in public participation in Austin. The community planning process had recently enlisted the City's organizational development team to help manage public meetings. Shortly after starting Imagine Austin, the City's Public Information Office created a position focused on Community Engagement. All three efforts sought both to re-invigorate public meetings and the potential for constructive dialogue within meetings, while also extending the opportunity to have a role in shaping the plan to many thousands more people who could not attend.

Challenges of Participation

Like many other cities across the country, a broad set of changes are remaking Austin. Some of these changes have direct implications for the traditional domain of comprehensive plans – the built city and how land uses are managed. Others are only loosely connected and outside the traditional skills of planners, but nevertheless are critical to changes community members see happening around them.

Planners in Austin grounded their approach on a foundation of community engagement and building agreement around the public's desires for the future and key approaches for achieving it. However, planners immediately hit upon two problems with this approach. First, two strands of best practices in community engagement— roughly, dialogue and aggregation approaches—sit uneasily together. Second, community members' desires for the future, quite reasonably, are not organized by the City Charter. The prominence of the planning process and its expansion community engagement piece make it difficult to remain true to public input while still working within the plan's authority.

Dialogue & Aggregation

Planners attempted to embrace two different types of best practices in community engagement. First, public meetings sought to encourage discussion and dialogue among participants, creating settings to allow deliberation among diverse stakeholders. Second, planners sought to cast a wide net, reaching people who would not normally attend a public meeting through fun, engaging, and quick tools. However, those two efforts solve different problems, and when used to gather a sense of the public's vision for Austin's future, the two practices are in tension with one another.

To the extent that public meetings succeed in provoking rich, thoughtful discussion, it is difficult to capture and report back to the broader public. When tools are introduced to capture at least the conclusions of that discussion (such as report-out sheets, sticky notes, or dot voting), participants bristle. Activists complained "no more dots" (and, in more recent engagement efforts, derided "arts and crafts" activities). Moreover, the results are awkwardly incorporated into the process. When tabulated, they become less than the sum of the discussion that produced them.

Meanwhile, participation tools beyond public meetings pose a different problem. Generally, these tools work through aggregation, such as tallying ratings or preferences. Generally, opportunities for open-ended comments are limited; when available, they quickly become overwhelming to process. Finally, aggregation's success presumes planners can craft the right question and pose the right trade-offs. It closes off opportunities for participants to explore new ways to balance competing priorities.

Not only do these two approaches to involvement have issues of their own, they bear an uneasy relationship to one another. Dialogue-driven public meetings offer richness and vibrancy, but suffer from a demographic skew that benefits established stakeholders, such as people with more education, whites, and homeowners. Meanwhile, aggregation tools can help overcome that skew, but the thinness of their results can sometimes make them difficult to interpret and rely on. Planners are left to muddle through how to balance competing claims. Sometimes they give weight to the vibrancy and nuance of meetings, while at other times they focus on the partial perspectives that are presented.

Austin planners sought to resolve this tension by monitoring participation demographics at every opportunity. Every survey and meeting asked for participants' demographics, including age, income, education, zip code, and race/ethnicity. These figures were compared against overall City of Austin demographics from the 2010 Census to identify gaps.

As gaps were identified, planners developed strategies to engage communities that were under-represented in the process. Often, these efforts used quick tools such as booths at events or presentations at community groups. Alternatively, planners should seek to match the vibrancy of public meetings for under-represented groups. Budgeting for focus groups in each round of public input could fill in these gaps with equally vibrant, open-ended discussion. Broader outreach through surveys, community events, and the like could then be used to test preliminary conclusions from meetings and focus groups.

The Limits of the Plan: What's In and What's Not

The comprehensive plan's greatest strengths remain its foundation in managing and coordinating land uses through regulations and capital improvements. For most communities, a comprehensive plan is typically one of the few high-profile, jurisdiction-wide, cross-cutting opportunities for public input. Planners, including outreach and engagement officials, typically seek to bring participants into the process by asking about bold, visionary ideas for the future.

However, when asked for their vision for the future, participants unsurprisingly respond with the breadth of what their local governments do, rather than narrowly focusing on the powers of planning. For example, quality public schools were a major concern while creating Imagine Austin, despite the fact that the school system is entirely separate from the City government, with separate taxing authority. (In fact, the planning area in Austin included territory from 13 different school districts.) Similarly, safety and community relations with the police, sustaining local businesses, teen pregnancy and other health behaviors, and workforce development are top concerns, but outside of the plan's core powers.
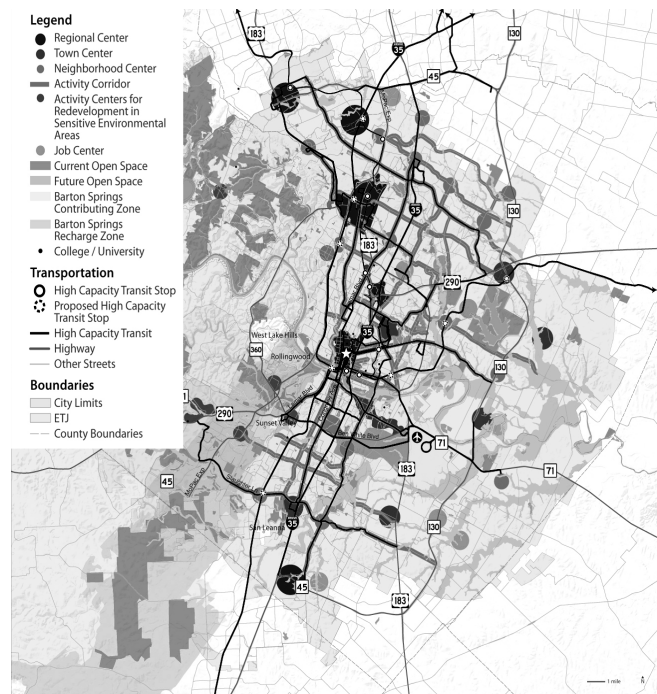
The Imagine Austin Growth Concept Map: This map identifies areas of growth and preservation to guide land development regulations and capital improvements. It provides a clear vision for implementing using the tools closest to the plan's powers.

The recommendations most closely linked to planning activities (including those that occur outside of the Planning Department per se) receive the most vigorous implementation. Those further away, including programs linked with education and workforce development, are more likely to be implemented in a piecemeal fashion, with no new ability to spur activity. Unfortunately, this is exactly opposite the public's priorities. In the final round of public input in Imagine Austin, when asked to rate the plan's eight priority programs, the one most controlled by the Planning Department (revise the City's Land Development Code) was the lowest priority.

This poses significant problems for planning in the new economy. People face very real problems that are related to planning's long-range perspective. Grounding the plan's legitimacy in public engagement means taking those problems seriously. But the limited powers of the plan beyond managing the built and natural environments means that implementation of solutions outside of planners' traditional domain is haphazard at best. This can produce cynicism among the public, undermining the engagement efforts that planners now depend on.

Comprehensive plans need a limiting factor – an easily communicated sense of the proper scope of comprehensive plans that clarifies and enables the public to participate, rather than closing out their concerns. Three possibilities stand out:

- Take the traditional approach: the physical plan. Diligently reinforce the scope of the plan from the start, beginning with the marketing, outreach, and engagement team. The built and natural environment must be woven into all communications about the plan.
- Embrace its breadth: an emerging practice in some cities (notably, Sunnyvale and Ontario, both in California) is to incorporate a general plan as a management tool that applies across municipal activities. This lifts the general plan beyond its focus on the built environment and makes it a general city policy document, on par with and linked to the city's budget process.
- Focus on long-term, interconnected trends: The plan could focus on trends that a take a decade or two to play out and require coordination across groups.

The first approach stays true to the powers of most plans, but can be difficult to communicate briefly. The second approach elevates the plan, but cannot be done by Planning Departments alone. The last approach seems to be where many plans arrive; however, the vagueness of long-term and interconnectedness make it difficult to say what topics are clearly in the plan and what topics are more appropriately left to the regular decision-making process of Councils and Mayors.

Conclusion

Imagine Austin was adopted by the Austin City Council in 2012. Implementation has worked through five levels: organizational alignment and partnerships, capital investments, regulations, and continued community engagement.

The City has established eight cross-departmental teams, one for each of eight priority programs included in the plan. In some cases, these teams include outside jurisdictions and community partners. In other, such as the City's newly formed Capital Planning Office, the focus is on internal alignment with the plan's goals. The Capital Planning Office used the plan's Vision and draft Priority Programs to organize and prioritize capital improvement plans and bond proposals. With the adoption of the plan, the Capital Planning Office has continued to link capital planning closely with the vision of the plan and its Growth Concept Map.

The most visible project from Imagine Austin is CodeNEXT. This multi-year, community driven process is rewriting Austin's Land Development Code. With guidance from Imagine Austin, CodeNext seeks to simplify the Land Development Code while making it easier to develop in support of the Growth Concept Map. This puts it squarely in the middle of many of Austin's fiercest debates over neighborhood preservation, growth, change, and affordability. Engaging the public is critical to creating a broadly acceptable code.

Planners have also put in place the strong, annual oversight process the plan calls for. Each year since adoption, planners have issued a report on implementation progress and made amendments necessary to keep the plan relevant to the public and decision-makers. Planners have also used speaking events to continue to highlight work being done to implement the plan.

Perhaps the strongest testament to Imagine Austin's success is that the plan and the process that created it are relevant. Other Austin city departments, knowing the public's high standards for community engagement, have adopted many of its tools and approaches. The Budget Office, for example, routinely engages the public early in the process of developing each year's budget through tools like Meeting-in-a-Box. Similarly, the plan is regularly invoked at Planning Commission and City Council hearings by people across the spectrum, from urbanists and developers to neighborhood preservationists and environmentalists. The plan has not eliminated serious disagreements about the proper way to balance the plan's goals, but it has given Austinites a shared sense of the future while they work through the details of implementation.