

## **A Historic and Cultural Preservation Element for the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan**

Austin Planning Commission  
Comprehensive Planning Subcommittee  
July 19, 2010

The Austin Planning Commission has voted to recommend adding new elements to the development of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. One new element is a “Historic and Cultural Preservation Element.” The Planning Commission recognizes that

- preservation of old buildings and landscapes that contribute to local community atmosphere,
- the use of new construction design standards that maintain or restore traditional pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and neighborhood sense of place,
- and the continued existence of many long-running locally-owned businesses

are all social goods tied to city planning. We have seen significant evidence in the first phase of the Comprehensive Plan development that many, if not most Austin residents are troubled by many changes in the local urban environment and are supportive of some efforts to regulate design of new buildings, preserve old buildings, sustain long-running locally owned small businesses, and generally maintain our local atmosphere. An important point to make is that this subject transcends historic zoning for buildings or sustaining iconic businesses – it includes saving murals and other forms of public art, trees and park features, key public vistas, wildlife (e.g., bats), etc.- basically all those sometimes intangible elements that make Austin a special place. The Planning Commission proposes to address these societal wishes in the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan by studying several questions:

1. Is the current method of identifying and preserving existing residential housing stock with historic value the best approach? A recent flurry of historic zoning requests presented by an agent who has a contract arrangement to receive payment based on property tax reductions has raised questions among neighbors, the Heritage Society, City staff, and City Council members. Should such contingency fee arrangements be prohibited? Is the increase in the number of buildings for which historic zoning is being sought significantly affecting the City’s general fund? Is this increase likely to affect the willingness of other local taxing entities (e.g., AISD, Travis County) to participate in the tax abatement program? In addition, many questions exist as to how to weigh the rights of property-owners who seek demolition permits for old buildings versus other nearby property owners who foresee their own land values possibly being affected negatively by radical changes in the local built environment.
2. Is the current method of creating local historic districts the best approach? Austin now has a revised Local Historic District policy that has caused a troubling division of opinions in at least one neighborhood. Can serious rancor be avoided and can consensus be reached more often through a better process?
3. In Austin’s Downtown, several buildings and blocks are considered to have special historic value (e.g., W. 4<sup>th</sup> in the Warehouse District). These properties have very high valuation and development entitlements that make redevelopment

in the future likely. Are these properties worth preserving in their current state? If so, how should property owners be compensated for possible changes in entitlements? Can properties be partially redeveloped and partially preserved to achieve a balance?

4. In recent years the Planning Commission has supported creating a process that would help owners of small local independent businesses to continue operating, or would reward land-owners who support continued operation by their small local independent business tenants. What is the best way to implement such a program? Is it a proper role of government to do so? Could the City partner with the Austin Independent Business Alliance to boost "Independent Business Investment Zones" (IBIZ)? The AIBA has offered a list of suggested actions that have been requested by their clients. The criteria for an IBIZ District include:
  - a. Have at least 75% locally owned businesses (currently all districts are 95-100% locally owned businesses)
  - b. Has between 20 and 100 businesses (our six districts range from 22 to 86 businesses)
  - c. Is no more than a mile long in walking distance.

Among the suggested help the City could provide are recycling services, more crosswalks and sidewalks, right-of-way landscaping, parking requirement fine-tuning, fast-tracking of permitting and infrastructure projects, traffic calming, support of public events in IBIZ Districts, lighting improvements, and increases in police patrols.

5. Are there means to identify other important urban and rural elements such as the bats at the Congress Ave Bridge, murals on many walls and buildings, moon towers, foot bridges in parks, the Pioneer Farm, etc. that hold special value to many persons and thus should receive protection or some form of recognition or other City support?

Rationale for treating these issues within a single new element in Comp Plan stems from the purported positive impact associated with preservation of local businesses, historic buildings, and special unique features and places. Various economic studies have suggested that local businesses are much more likely to circulate revenue in the local economy (see [http://www.amiba.net/pdf/Economic\\_Impact\\_study\\_tx.pdf](http://www.amiba.net/pdf/Economic_Impact_study_tx.pdf)) Separate studies have shown that older, well-reserved buildings create desirable settings for residences, thus helping boost property values, and also create areas conducive to business in commercial areas. The City Council has asked for a new specific economic study regarding historic preservation as part of a new historic landmark process resolution.