

Shaping Imagine Austin

The Imagine Austin process was designed to engage all members of the Austin community in developing a vision for the city's future. Beginning in 2009, the City solicited public input on existing challenges and opportunities and how the City should respond to them as it prepares for a future whose only certainty will be its difference from today.

With the help of the Comprehensive Plan Citizens Advisory Task Force, whose 38 members were appointed by the Austin City Council and Travis County Commissioners Court, Imagine Austin engaged thousands of Austinites in setting direction for the future. The process was built on two fundamental ideas. First, give as many people as possible the opportunity to participate—in whatever venue with as much time as they had to give. Second, work iteratively, so that each phase of participation took up where the last left off, building on prior work.

Insert table of participation.

The public's first opportunity to shape Imagine Austin was an August 2009 public participation workshop. More than 70 Austinites identified key communities that should be involved as well as the steps necessary to engage them. Six principles were developed from that meeting and shaped *Making Austin: Public Participation in a new Comprehensive Plan*:

- Open to all
- Community engagement
- Transparency
- Enthusiastic and vibrant
- Engaging the underrepresented
- Fun

Developing the public participation plan itself set out an important step in Imagine Austin's approach to community input: monitor who was participating and find ways of connecting to communities not represented. In the case of the participation workshop, as in many other community engagement efforts, people of color and people with less than a Bachelor's degree were underrepresented. Two focus groups were held to test the principles with people in these groups.

Shaping the plan

Telling people about the plan is only the beginning. Actually engaging Austinites in shaping the plan is the ultimate goal of public participation. Mindful of the many competing demands on the public's time, the Imagine Austin team sought to provide as many ways in to the process as possible, while always striving to balance input from our most engaged citizens, able to provide countless hours and detailed comments, with the briefer contacts from the rest of the community.

Public input was organized into five steps, interspersed with major plan milestones that were reviewed by the Citizens Advisory Task Force, Planning Commission, and City Council.

Four of these steps were structured as Community Forum Series, with each series consisting of multiple public meetings, surveys, and other tools. The other step consisted of a several-months-long Working Groups process. Each of these steps and milestones are recounted below.

Tools for engagement

A number of tools were used at different times throughout the process. The questions asked of the public were tailored in each step to match the tool being used.

- **Public meetings** were held in different parts of the city and different times of day throughout the process. Meetings were structured to encourage or require participants to engage with one another directly by working in small groups or indirectly by posting responses during the course of the meeting.
- **Online and paper surveys** accompanied every step in the process, allowing Austinites to participate at their convenience. While most survey respondents completed surveys online, paper surveys were distributed through a number of mechanisms: at libraries and public events and, in some cases, inclusion in the *Austin-American Statesman* or *Austin Chronicle*.
- **Online forums and comments** offered a less structured way for Austinites to communicate with staff and with one another.
- **Traveling teams** visited high-traffic areas such as football games, farmers markets, and festivals to promote the process, distribute surveys, and directly engage passersby.
- **Meetings-in-a-Box** allowed community groups, businesses, and individuals to host their own meetings at their convenience.
- A **Speakers Bureau** that allowed community groups to host a presentation from City staff and provide comments.

Imagine Austin was overseen monthly, by a Citizens Advisory Task Force and a committee of Planning Commission, and less frequently by a committee of the City Council. As public meetings, each of these allowed for citizen communication, as well as direct public engagement with staff, Task Force members, Planning Commissioners, and Councilmembers.

Demographics

The demographics of participants were monitored throughout the process. As gaps were identified, additional outreach was developed to overcome them.

The results below show the total demographics from the first three Community Forum Series. While some gaps remain, being aware of them allowed planners and Task Force members to understand who

the public input represented and to rely on other avenues to complement public input. This could take the form of formal and informal communication with community leaders or reliance on previous planning efforts, such as the Hispanic Quality of Life Study and its community oversight team.

[Insert charts of demographics]

Phases & milestones

The Imagine Austin process was structured around two principles: repeat public engagement, with each round building on the previous round, and repeated check-ins with Planning Commission and City Council.

Community Forum Series #1

(5,892 participants)

The first Community Forum Series was organized around three questions:

- What are Austin's strengths?
- What are our challenges?
- How can the city be improved on its 200th anniversary, 2039?

Starting with an October 2009 Open House at the Austin Convention Center, Community Forum Series #1 ran for seven months, with six public meetings and an online and paper survey. The Meeting-in-a-Box was also introduced at this time.

Community Forum Series #2

(4,211 participants)

The second Community Forum Series consisted of two parts. The first part developed and tested Components of a Vision Statement. The second part was an interactive chip exercise, where participants worked together to allocate Austin's future growth across the city and in different forms. Four public meetings featuring the chip exercises were followed by eight community-sponsored and hosted chip exercises, to produce 63 total maps. Community Forum Series #2 included a second round of surveys and Meetings-in-a-Box focusing on the Components of the Vision statement, as well as Speak Week, in which traveling teams visited XX locations throughout the city. This round of input also included a statistically valid survey of 1,100 Austinites to develop the Vision components.

Vision

Creating the Vision began with Community Forum Series #1, when the public was asked about Austin's strengths and weaknesses and what the city should be like in 2039. The Task Force reviewed preliminary results and developed key ideas to be represented in the Vision. The public reviewed components of the

Vision at Community Forum Series #2. Using those results, the Task Force prepared a final Vision statement, included as Chapter 3 in this plan, which was endorsed by City Council in August 2010.

Community Forum Series #3

(4,761 participants)

Using the chip exercise maps and current trends, five alternate future scenarios were created, each illustrating a different way that Austin could grow in the future. The future scenarios were assessed on a range of sustainability indicators. In the third Community Forum Series, the public reviewed and rated these scenarios at nine Open House meetings, in Community Conversation kits, at Traveling Team booths, and by paper and online surveys.

Planning Framework & Preferred Scenario

The Plan Framework and Preferred Scenario set out key strategic directions for the City to take to achieve the Vision. The Plan Framework contains policy guidance, while the Preferred Scenario shows the spatial patterns of growth that support the Vision. They were developed with the Citizens Advisory Task Force and reviewed by 19 City Boards and Commissions, Planning Commission, and City Council. In March 2011, City Council forwarded the Plan Framework and Preferred Scenario to the Working Groups for more detailed work. The strategic directions are incorporated into this plan as Building Block Policies; the Preferred Growth Scenario was the basis for the Growth Concept Map.

Working Groups

Hundreds of Austin residents and area leaders joined seven Building Block Working Groups to develop actions to implement the directions included in the Plan Framework. These seven Working Groups met on 22 occasions throughout spring and summer 2011 and took two surveys. The actions and priorities they developed are included in Chapter 5.

Community Forum Series #4

The last round of public input was structured around review of the initial draft comprehensive plan. Beginning at the Release Party in October 2011, Austinites weighed in on the plan's priorities, as well as on the draft plan itself. The plan was also presented to 19 Boards and Commissions. Staff, consultants, and members of the Citizens Advisory Task Force and Planning Commission reviewed all public comments on the plan for inclusion in the adoption draft.