



COUNCIL COMMITTEE REPORT

COMMITTEE ON OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Date: May 26, 2016

Agenda Item #: 6

Agenda Item: Briefing and possible action regarding the City's possible membership to the Biophilic Cities Network.

Vote 3-0-0-1 to send the item to Council for formal action. Approved on Mayor Pro Tem Tovo's motion and on Chair Pool's second. CM Zimmerman was off the dais.

Sponsors/Department: Office of Sustainability

Presenters: Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer, Office of Sustainability, Leah Haynie, Environmental Program Coordinator, Urban Forestry Division, Development Services Department.

Summary of Discussion

- Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer with the Office of Sustainability, introduced the concept of biophilia, which is "the urge to affiliate with other forms of life," and explained the benefits of living in nature-integrated urban areas, including cognitive performance, reduced stress, and improved mood.
- Ms. Athens further explained that a Biophilic City recognizes these benefits the community receives from nature, and sees nature as a core principle of urban design and planning.
- Leah Haynie, Environmental Program Coordinator with the Development Services Department introduced the basics of the Biophilic Cities Network. Led by Professor Tim Beatley at the University of Virginia, the original founding cities included San Francisco, California, Portland, Oregon, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Phoenix, Arizona, among others.
- A full 11 cities joined the organization in 2013 because they recognized nature as an integral component of their city of the future, and they wanted a seat at the table where advanced theory and practice for biophilic cities was being executed through a combination of collaborative research, dialogue, information exchange, and teaching.
- Ms. Haynie also explained the requirements for the City of Austin to join the network: 1) officially stating the intention to join the Network, 2) paying a one-time fee of \$250, 3)

preparing a statement covering how the City currently prioritizes nature in the city, including goals and aspirations to further incorporate nature into our planning and design efforts, and 4) selecting at least 5 nature-based performance indicators.

- The fourth requirement aligns with existing programs. As a part of the existing Sustainability Key Performance Tracking, the Office of Sustainability already tracks the following Indicators: Number of trees planted annually, Percent of Tree canopy coverage, Number of Residential units within ½ mile of park/open space, the Environmental Integrity Index, and the Amount of permanently preserved Land by Category.
- The hub for communications and community engagement will be the Nature in the City communication platform, which consists of a Facebook page, monthly newsletter, and a Nature in the City blog.
- Austin representatives will also benefit from access to training and communication with the network. Austin in turn will share information with Partner cities and have the opportunity to host delegations from around the world.
- Staff Recommendation: Support efforts to ‘integrate nature into the City’ and officially support the City of Austin joining the Biophilic Cities Network.
- Mayor Pro Tem Tovo asked for clarification on whether the “Number of Residential units within ½ mile of park/open space” aligns with a metric currently being used. She further asked whether tracking these metrics would require any additional resources. Ms. Athens explained that the intention was for all of the required performance indicators to be consistent with indicators that are being used in conjunction with Imagine Austin, but that she would double check the exact metric in question. Ms. Athens did not anticipate any additional costs, as all of the metrics are already being tracked.
- Vice Chair Garza expressed concern that there may be requests for additional staffing in the future. Ms. Athens said that she did not plan for any additional staffing because staff are working in this vein as a part of the programs they are already involved in. The only additional responsibilities would be optional opportunities such as conference calls and training.

Speakers

None.

Direction

The Committee voted to send the item to Council.

Recommendation

The recommendation to submit the item to Council for formal action was made on Mayor Pro Tem Tovo’s motion and on Chair Pool’s second. CM Zimmerman was off the dais.