

Draft letter from the Design Commission regarding the Convention Center expansion plan:

Dear Members of the City Council and Mayor Adler,

As members of the Austin Design Commission, we offer the following comments regarding the proposed expansion of the city's convention center, as you have charged us to do in our mandate to provide advisory recommendations "in developing public policy and to promote excellence in the design and development of the urban environment."

We take no position on whether the convention center should expand. But if it does, the expansion's design will potentially be the single greatest factor in whether the change is profoundly positive or profoundly negative. Accordingly, the Design Commission recommends:

1. **No expansion should completely close or enclose Second or Third Streets.** Imagine Austin calls for a "compact and connected" Austin, but closing those streets would continue our ignoble design history of creating and preserving massive "super blocks" that exacerbate congestion, hamstringing the ability of traffic to respond to localized impediments by diverting to nearby roads, and generally make the city a less pleasant place to travel.

Delegates from the Austin Convention Center and Visitor's Bureau have advised us that most of the space is needed for smaller, modular meetings, so a three-block-wide building – even one with pedestrian paseos – is simply not necessary. By having conventioners enter the streetscape – even briefly – to reach different parts of the center complex, we will foster an active and vibrant streetscape. Similarly, we discourage the use of sky bridges.

2. **The space above the expansion must not be left empty and wasted.** Downtown Austin has some of the most valuable and sought-after real estate in the world. A convention center expansion that is limited to three or four stories would waste this space and push demand to other areas where there are competing demands and less supportive infrastructure.
3. **The expansion must incorporate substantial residential and/or office space to ensure that the expansion enlivens downtown rather than making the area a street-life dead-zone and tourist trap.** Utilizing the space above any expansion and leaving Second and Third Streets open would allow for residential and/or office towers to be constructed above two of the three expansion blocks, to accompany the proposed hotel tower.

We believe that this heterogeneous mix of uses would be the key to transforming the blocks around the convention center into a lively and industrious district. Delegates from the Convention Center and Visitor's Bureau have advised us that they structure their bookings so that conventions are active during the week but load-out and move-in are done during the weekends. It is no wonder that the surrounding area is so barren and unpopulated on weekends and fails to support substantial week-round commerce and activity. We believe that visitors come to Austin to engage with – rather than be isolated from – our beloved community. We should not sequester them off into their own homogenous district.

4. **Any expansion must incorporate mass transit facilities to transport tourists and conventioners from the airport to their downtown hotels.** The Convention Center and Visitor's Bureau was unable to give us any figures regarding how visitors reach the Center and

their downtown hotels. The lack of rapid, frequent, and sustained mass transit from the airport suggests that they rely extensively on rental cars or single-passenger commercial vehicles. A transit line with those qualities would help alleviate congestion and parking demand, and would be able to take advantage of the terminus of the Red Line train to provide a more city-wide rapid transit network. Because transport for tourists is an allowable use of the Hotel Occupancy Tax, creative means could be devised to dedicate a portion of that revenue to supporting such a project (for example, pre-paid tourist Cap Metro vouchers distributed at the airport or in convention materials).

5. **All available financing options must be explored, including rededicating the Hotel Occupancy Tax as much as possible to purposes that enhance the quality of life for both Austinites and visitors.** We believe that all delivery and/or financing options should be explored, including the use of public-private partnerships.

The building portion of the expansion could potentially be delivered by integrating the whole-life needs of the facility under one procurement using private-sector financing. The development of hotel, residential, and/or office towers above the expansion could yield additional economic impact as well as revenue sources that could offset the cost of the project.

With regard to the Hotel Occupancy Tax, we believe Council should explore all available uses for tax revenues that could be freed up by finding alternative financing for the expansion. [Texas Attorney General Opinion GA-0124](#) specifically recognizes that in incorporated cities, “it is for the city’s governing body to determine” whether a use of funds is “in a manner directly enhancing and promoting tourism and the convention and hotel industry” as long as it is not used for “general revenue purposes or general governmental operations of a municipality.” There are plenty of worthy projects in Austin that could qualify under that allowance.

Finally, there is nothing evident in state law restricting the ability of the city to use the Tax to finance convention center operations or buildings, but to then dedicate the revenues from bookings and rent to city purposes.

Respectfully Approved and Submitted by Resolution,

City of Austin Design Commission