



AIA Austin

June 6, 2017

The Honorable Mayor Adler
Honorable City Council Members
Code Advisory Group Members
City of Austin Planning Commission
City of Austin Zoning & Platting Commission
City of Austin CodeNEXT Staff

Re: AIA Austin CodeNEXT Charrette Key Findings

On Tuesday, May 9, 2017, AIA Austin facilitated an all-day CodeNEXT Charrette with local design and real estate professionals, after which a public reception immediately followed. This charrette brought together over 70 of the city's leading architects, planners, landscape architects, civil engineers, developers, and real estate attorneys to test the draft Land Development Code and zoning map on real properties in a wide range of contexts. The purpose of the charrette was to better understand the look and feel of the draft code, visualize the outcomes, and study whether these outcomes are in alignment with the city's goals outlined in the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. This guiding document envisions a compact and connected community that is vibrant, livable, and sustainably manages our environmental resources.

After attending the charrette reception, Mayor Adler was quoted comparing the draft Land Development Code to a car; "If you take this out for a test drive, there are going to be rattles and things that need to be adjusted". AIA Austin is appreciative of the immense effort that has been put into this first draft, and we recognize that there are kinks that need to be worked out through the draft process. CodeNEXT is an iterative process, and must be open to constructive criticism and new information, which could lead to both minor and significant changes in future drafts. Our Chapter is committed to making positive contributions to continuing this conversation. In keeping with this analogy, we are obliged to offer key findings from the charrette and recommended repairs to help make CodeNEXT into the fine-tuned machine that is intended. This document is intentionally high-level, and will be complemented by a full report with detailed findings, analysis, and recommendations at a later date. The following are a few key findings from the CodeNEXT Charrette:

Inconsistent Mapping

Charrette participants experienced confusion with the patchwork mapping of new zoning categories and the overall intent of the draft map; several test areas had transect and non-transect zoning along the same block, or across the street. This will create unpredictable and incompatible development patterns, and therefore we suggest that base zones should be recalibrated to allow a more widespread implementation of transect zones. Further, as the



fundamental mapping approach is to simply match the existing entitlements on the ground, it is unclear how we, as a city, are going to achieve the goal of being compact and connected. A framework for creating new small area plans also needs to be part of the CodeNEXT discussion; without these, we will never meet the goals outlined in Imagine Austin.

Initial Recommendations:

- A. Recalibrate transect zones to work throughout the urban core. Non-transect zones will be appropriate in more "drivable suburban" places outside of the urban core.
- B. Create a new, truly urban version of T6 that will allow for reasonable development downtown. If DC and CC remain downtown, revise language throughout the code that refers to non-transect zones as "drivable suburban".
- C. Recommend to City Council to mandate revisions to all small area plans to align them with Imagine Austin.

Overly Prescriptive Form-Based Regulations

The draft code seems to be preoccupied with building types and dimensional constraints to the point where charrette participants were literally recreating "cookie cutter" footprints to place on parcels. This fundamental rigidity to the building types and lot dimensions is incompatible with Austin's large variety of lot sizes & shapes, dramatic terrain, and cherished urban forest. Several teams encountered sites that "broke" the system by either requiring lot aggregation, producing an extremely uncompetitive project, or were otherwise challenged with undevelopable constraints. We are concerned that the restrictive nature of these form-based zones will disincentivize the exact same walkable urban infill development that Imagine Austin calls for. Property owners may opt to keep underutilized properties as-is rather than redevelop using overly restrictive regulations.

Initial Recommendations:

- A. Relax building form dimensions that do not affect the public realm. Detailed diagrams depicting allowable side a rear "wings" do little for street life, but create unnecessary hardships for residents and designers.
- B. Eliminate minimum lot depths. This creates too many issues with Austin's diversity of lot sizes, and does nothing to improve the public realm.
- C. Allow projects flexibility in meeting the dimensional requirements. If all the dimensional regulations are to remain, consider a system in which projects are compliant by meeting X% of the items, and give priority to the items that relate most to the public realm.
- D. Eliminate stepbacks in downtown and the urban core, which reduce allowable height and FAR. Code changes should encourage increased density and allow more downtown sites to be developed, which will help meet the increased housing demand.

Missing Middle Housing is Still Largely Missing

AIA Austin has been committed to seeing more Missing Middle housing, which represents a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types compatible in scale with single-family homes,



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built under the new code. The charrette highlighted many barriers to realizing this vision. The primary obstacle is that Missing Middle building types are simply not allowed in enough transect or non-transect zones. While participants did see opportunities for new building types, the missing middle types (row house, live/work, etc.) that already exist in the draft code could adequately satisfy this need if they were permitted in more transect zones. Additional constraints that led to this result were the tight dimensional controls that precluded viable Missing Middle structures on a number of lots; as well as the need for a full site plan review for anything over two dwelling units. The site plan submittal waiver for "residential heavy" projects (3-9 units in a transect zone) appears to be entirely left to the discretion of the Development Services Director.

Initial Recommendations:

- A. *Incorporate more Missing Middle building types into all T3, T4, and T5 zones. Allowing this type of development in more transects will naturally lead to more of it being built.*
- B. *Relax building form dimensions per previous recommendations. These housing types need maximum flexibility to be a viable option and respond sensitively to neighborhood contexts.*
- C. *Eliminate full site plan submittal requirements for residential projects of ten or fewer units. This expensive and time-consuming process may otherwise incentivize developers to just build large single-family homes that don't trigger this requirement.*

Relaxed Parking Minimums Don't Go Far Enough

The noticeable shift from two to one required parking space for residential units allowed considerable flexibility for charrette teams to meet other form-based regulations. This change was widely praised as a step in the right direction, as was the relative loosening of requirements for several uses. Increased restaurant parking led to unviable projects for some charrette teams. (We were pleased to learn after the charrette that restaurant parking requirements in the current draft were in error and that they are being recalibrated for the second draft.) Parking reductions also caused confusion in that the existing CBD exemption was nowhere to be found, and the overall reduction was capped at a mere 40%. Reinstating parking requirements downtown, and uniformly capping parking reductions at 40% citywide runs counter to the priority of a Compact and Connected Austin. The following recommendations generally promote a more market-based approach to parking; given that almost all projects downtown are still providing abundant parking, and several of the charrette teams provided parking above minimum requirements:

Initial Recommendations:

- A. *Eliminate minimum parking requirements downtown to match current policy. Projects are still providing ample parking to meet the market's needs, and there's no minimum requirement in place to dictate this pattern.*
- B. *Eliminate the parking reduction cap of 40%. This will allow flexibility and encourage a gradual mode shift in transit-rich neighborhoods.*
- C. *Reduce minimum parking requirements for all uses to at least match current code. No uses should be burdened with higher minimum parking requirements in the future.*



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Improved Formatting of the Code

The illustrative diagrams and graphic style was unanimously praised for being a significant improvement over the current code. Code users were (mostly) able to find what they needed quickly, and the transect tables were a welcome addition. The most obvious weak point of the transect zoning pages was the excessive use of notes and footnotes scattered at the bottom of pages. Most teams had to backtrack at some point during the charrette to account for a stray footnote, which could have been avoided with better integration. We worry that starting out with so many footnotes does not create a simple, flexible zoning framework that can adapt throughout the years.

Initial Recommendations:

- A. *Reduce the dependence on footnotes to convey important information. Whenever possible, integrate the notes into the tables or diagrams, or otherwise question whether the footnote is necessary.*
- B. *Provide direct links when a reference to another section is used in the digital version of the code.*

It is important to note that several important draft code sections were not released at the time of the charrette and therefore could not be tested. This includes the Affordable Housing Incentive Program (AHIP) and Functional Green, both of which could have dramatic effects on the built environment and will need close examination upon release.

AIA Austin looks forward to supporting the implementation of a future draft of CodeNEXT that has considered the above key findings and recommendations, in addition to the more detailed recommendations that will be released with the full charrette report. We are committed to being a key stakeholder among Austin's community leaders in shaping the code to align with the goals set forth in Imagine Austin, and we appreciate the opportunity to engage with CodeNEXT staff to this end.

Sincerely,

Luis Jauregui, FAIA
President, AIA Austin