

Key Goals for a Successful New Land Development Code

Since the 10-1 Council took office, we as City Council members have been listening to the people of Austin, our city staff and consultants throughout the difficult process of creating a new Land Development Code that reflects our shared values and meets the challenges of a growing city.

Because of the length and detail of the Code, we have decided to outline our thoughts on some of the major issues that will determine how we move forward as the Code enters its next phase.

Imagine Austin provides a vision for Austin's future, but our existing 30 year-old Land Development Code lacks the tools to help us realize that vision. Under our current Code, our fast growing city is facing a confusing and costly permitting process. This is contributing to rising housing costs, demolitions of homes and older affordable housing, gentrification and displacement of long-time communities. The current Code also limits our ability to address risk of flooding, traffic congestion, and to provide more affordable housing options.

It has become clear that we cannot allow the current, unwieldy Code to remain in place.

We share the belief that a new Code is a critical opportunity to create tools to help address many of our city's challenges, better manage our growth, and protect what we love about our city. We do so while acknowledging that a new Code by itself cannot solve all our community's problems and that local government is limited in its ability to control the market. The task before us is to calibrate the tools and levers that we do have to achieve, in practice, Imagine Austin's vision.

The goals listed below cover many, but not all, of the major Code challenges and opportunities, including housing supply and affordability, permitting, flooding, impacts of growth, transportation, and environment. These goals represent many of our shared expectations for a successful rewrite of Austin's new land development Code and a path forward.

A successful Land Development Code rewrite will:

- Provide more housing choices and supply for Austinites at all stages of life and incomes
- Encourage the development and preservation of affordable housing
- Reduce time and cost of permitting by providing more clarity, certainty, and ease of use
- Better manage the costs of growth and provide more effective planning tools
- Preserve and respect neighborhood identity and quality of life
- Reduce wildfire and flood risk and manage runoff as a resource
- Support small, local businesses and the creative community
- Enable transportation choices, improve safety, and prepare for our mobility future
- Strengthen environmental protections, increase public open spaces, and conserve natural resources

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Provide more housing choices and supply for Austinites at all stages of life and incomes

Our new Code should allow for a wide variety of housing types which are affordable to households at a broad range of incomes and for people at every stage of life from young, single adults, families with children, to seniors.

A Code That Works

- Sensitively provides for more housing types in neighborhoods, transitions, activity centers, along transportation corridors, and near transit stations
- Enables more small accessory dwelling units (ADUs) while maintaining building and impervious cover limits, in order to help homeowners with housing costs and allow more flexibility as households' needs change over time
- Allows exceptions to building requirements for small accessory dwelling units (ADU) to provide incentives to preserve the original residence or create affordability
- Allows families with homes on substandard lots to more easily remodel and stay in place
- Allows homes in more commercial areas to help provide more housing
- Allows for site plan requirements and administrative approvals that support the development of diverse housing options, including ADUs and multiplexes where appropriate
- Includes development and design standards that support the development of housing along transportation corridors
- Helps to correct past patterns of segregation and helps Austin achieve its Fair Housing goals

Encourage the development and preservation of affordable housing

Our new Code can create opportunities to build and preserve housing that is more affordable than homes being built today under the current Code. The Code can encourage property owners to keep existing housing that is affordable to middle and lower-income families and offer targeted incentives to build new affordable housing. Expanding affordable housing in more areas of Austin will create opportunities for people to live closer to work, school, family and friends, and will help address the historic inequities and economic segregation of lower-income Austinites.

A Code That Works

- Provides incentives for development of on-site, publicly supported or income-restricted housing for properties along transportation corridors as well as in more high opportunity areas of the city
- Provides incentives for preservation of existing housing that is affordable to middle and lower-income households
- Promotes affordable, flexible live/work spaces to support artists, musicians, and small business owners along transportation corridors and activity centers
- Encourages developments that include publicly supported or income-restricted housing to provide a greater number of family-sized units
- Revises and expands housing programs, such as the S.M.A.R.T. Housing and Density Bonus programs, to maximize production of income-restricted housing

Reduce time and cost of permitting by providing more clarity, certainty, and ease of use

The current permitting process for construction and remodeling of housing and small businesses is confusing and expensive. Our new Code should help projects be more affordable by reducing the time and costs of permitting with a less complicated Code.

A Code That Works

- Simplifies permitting to ensure consistency and organizes zoning categories with graphics and labeling that is easy to understand and use
- Supports efforts to reduce permitting barriers and home remodeling costs to help families stay in their homes such as those proposed in the new Family Homestead Initiative
- Allows more affordable, pre-approved building and remodel design options to help seniors age in place, and middle and lower income households to remain in their neighborhoods
- Establishes reliable expectations for development review timelines and processes

Better manage the costs of growth and provide more effective planning tools

Better managing the impacts of growth can help reduce costs to taxpayers and enable growth to better pay for itself. Improving our planning processes will better address how and where we grow and help reduce community conflicts.

A Code That Works

- Ensures new developments contribute their fair share to improve streets, signals, sidewalk, bike, transit, parks and trail networks
- Incorporates energy efficient green building requirements for new developments to reduce energy costs to consumers, as well as new power demand costs for our utility company
- Enables planning to better consider existing capacity in our utility and storm water infrastructure
- Provides tools to enable an improved small area planning process to encourage growth along transportation corridors and Imagine Austin centers

Preserve and respect neighborhood identity and quality of life

With many of Austin's neighborhoods under redevelopment pressure, the Code must provide ways to preserve neighborhood quality of life. These include diverse housing choices, flood mitigation, access to parks, safe walkable streets, and appropriate parking. Imagine Austin envisions more housing along transit corridors and town centers and our Code must support that goal.

A Code That Works

- Integrates existing community planning efforts, including neighborhood plans, and provides tools to enable a clear process and dedicated staff for creation of new plans and updates of plans
- Maintains a public process for requests to increase development beyond what is allowed, such as increased height, including when errors are made in construction

- Includes new zoning tools that ensure compatibility between residential and commercial areas, including height and size, noise and light pollution, deliveries and trash collection – to provide
- Carefully considered transitions between existing neighborhoods and new mixed-use redevelopments
- Requires a public process for permitting bars and nightclubs located near homes, another bar or nightclub, schools or daycare, hospital, or uses like libraries and churches
- Prohibits adult entertainment near residences
- Fits parking requirements to location, including the possibility of increased or reduced parking requirements, after considering factors such as sidewalks, transit access, protected bike lanes, and locations near schools
- Ensures neighborhood streets remain accessible to Fire and EMS services

Support small, local businesses and the creative community

Austin's local businesses and creative community are key contributors to Austin's local economy, vibrant neighborhoods and streets, and overall quality of life. Austin needs flexible and affordable spaces for small, local businesses, and for creative enterprises, including performance and retail spaces.

A Code That Works

- Prepares for walkable Imagine Austin centers and supports a small area planning process to ensure affordable, flexible spaces can be created.
- Encourages office, retail, and residential space along transportation corridors that support small local businesses and creative work to achieve live/work opportunities
- Provides tools to align developments along transportation corridors with City Bond investments to create opportunities to live and work near transit and amenities as well as to leverage our public investment

Reduce wildfire and flood risk, and manage runoff as a resource

Extreme weather events aren't new to Austin. Central Texas is considered "Flash Flood Alley" and climate projections indicate increased extreme weather events. It's important to prepare and protect the public and property from harm.

A Code That Works

- Includes strategies to address localized flooding by promoting collection and beneficial use of stormwater, "functional green" elements in commercial developments, and limiting flood mitigation exceptions in neighborhoods
- Enables the use of green stormwater infrastructure within the City Capital Improvement Projects as recommended by the Flood Mitigation Task Force
- Requires commercial redevelopment projects to reduce runoff to match that of an undeveloped tract in order to help address longstanding problems of localized flooding
- Emphasizes tree protection by consolidating and locating requirements more prominently
- Mitigates and reduces the risk of wildfire by integrating with the Wildfire Urban Interface Code and facilitates evacuations by planning for appropriate roadway connectivity

Enable transportation choices, improve safety, and prepare for our mobility future

People need to travel safely, efficiently, and reliably. With limited space to expand roads, the Code needs to support more effective transit and other transportation options. The new Code should support and prepare our community for new technology and opportunities to transform Austin's mobility future.

A Code That Works

- Supports street and traffic signal design, bus stops, and bike lanes that make driving, biking, and transit easier, safer, and faster
- Requires sidewalk design to support accessibility and walkability by providing trees for shade and building frontages that are scaled for comfort
- Enables urban trail connections and requires projects to connect to existing trails or construct new ones in coordination with the Urban Trails Master Plan
- Creates a safe pedestrian, bike, and transit environment in Mixed Use and Main Street zones by reducing the number of curb cuts
- Helps prepare our streets for electric, autonomous, and shared mobility choices including along transportation corridors and in transit oriented development, and enables convenient electric refueling options
- Encourages more housing and jobs along corridors and near activity centers to enable easy access to transit services

Strengthen environmental protections, increase public open spaces, and conserve natural resources

Protecting our natural environment (air, water, soil, urban forest) improves the health and resilience of our community in the face of a changing climate, growing population, and limited natural resources. We must be prepared.

A Code That Works

- Carries forward our historic watershed and Hill Country protections, like the Save Our Springs and 2013 Watershed Protection Ordinances, including standards in the Barton Springs Zone of the Edwards Aquifer, and Hill Country Roadway Ordinance
- Incorporates the Integrated Green Infrastructure Plan as a resource to guide Code decisions and improve overall sustainability and good health
- Supports the Dark Skies initiative and reduces negative impact on neighboring properties by minimizing flood lighting on façades
- Provides "Functional Green" tools (green roofs and walls, stormwater collection and re-use, rain gardens) to help landscapes function as water quality filters and reduce burden on stormwater pipes and our drinking water lake supply
- Improves standards for calculating open space requirements for developments to promote greater variety of usable and desirable public spaces as well as expansion and connectivity of trail networks