

URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES **UPDATE**

WITH EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**City of Austin
Design Commission**

TABLE OF CONTENTS.



Executive Summary	3
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Background	5
------------	---

Barriers	11
----------	----

How the Update Will Be Accomplished	12
-------------------------------------	----

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Urban Design Guidelines are a set of recommendations that promote architectural and urban design standards reflective of Austin's shared values. When first created as the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines in 2000, these recommendations focused exclusively on projects located in Austin's downtown. Then in 2008, in response to Austin's growing urban core, there was an effort to make the guidelines broader to help shape the urban environment throughout the city as it grows. While this effort did rename the guidelines to reflect this intent, it did little else to promote their use beyond the Central Business District. Since this time, Austin's urban core has grown tremendously and the city has adopted many policies, initiatives, and plans to which the current UDG may not fully align with. Therefore, the Design Commission believes it is time to update the Urban Design Guidelines once again.

The proposed update includes three main priorities. The first will focus on updating the UDG to have a broader applicability throughout Austin's urban core, and therefore, the ability to serve a wider range of project types. Secondly, the update will better align the UDG with current community goals; including, but not limited to, adopted city policies related to affordability, connectivity, equity, environment, and mobility. The UDG will also provide guidance on urban design in less dense areas outside of nodes, as well as infrastructure projects. Lastly, the update will seek to bring more clarity to the guidelines by creating a more inviting and user-friendly document that all Austinites can seek insight from, and resulting in a more predictable review process."

It is proposed that the update be accomplished in three phases. Phase I is the preparation phase, it will consist of crafting a guiding narrative, defining the core values, creating a community engagement plan, forming Working Groups, selecting



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

Phase II will be the creation phase, where the Community Ambassadors will begin outreach and reporting back and the Working Groups will begin drafting the guidelines. At the end of this phase, the first draft will be tested and the results will be used to inform the subsequent draft. The first draft will also be presented to the Design Commission for feedback.

Phase III is the final work phase, where the final draft will be crafted and graphic design and formatting will be added, an Urban Design Guidelines webpage will be created, and a Boards and Commission engagement plan will be created. After final community input and Board & Commission approval, the new UDG draft will be presented to City Council for consideration.



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BACKGROUND

What are the Urban Design Guidelines?

THE URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES are a series of design recommendations for architecture, site design, and open space, for the purpose of cultivating design excellence in both private and public development, all contributing to the good of the public realm throughout the city. They serve to set expectations and incentivize high quality design and place making as it is shown that cities who invest in high quality development attract people, investment, and economic opportunity.

How are they used, and by whom?

The UDGs are a resource during pre-application and application discussions between applicants and their Design Teams. Design teams use the guidelines in the preparation of clear and consistent design solutions that reflect the purpose of the Urban Design Guidelines. City staff, planning professionals and design commissioners use the guidelines to assess development proposals and evaluate whether or not they contribute to inspiring and lively streets and places.

THE UDGs HAVE EXPANDED IN SCOPE OVERTIME; WE NEED TO PUSH THIS FURTHER:

The Urban Design Guidelines have evolved over time to serve the projected needs of our community. This was most recently demonstrated in February of 2008 when the Design Commission recognized an opportunity to expand elements of urban design beyond the borders of downtown Austin with an apt rebranding from “Downtown Design Guidelines” to “Urban Design Guidelines”. Although the shift had introduced a desire for being more inclusive of projects throughout our city, the main beneficiaries of the revised guidance have disproportionately been downtown area developments.

ADVANCING STREET ACTIVATION: The Urban Design Guidelines have effectively promoted the implementation of Great Streets as not only a precursor (gatekeeper requirement) to achieving the Density Bonus but also as a means for advancing street activation. Developers have embraced solutions for going beyond mere aesthetics and walkability and have incorporated multimodal, human-scaled elements that advance the livability of our city. The UDGs have enabled the commission to make impactful recommendations that have led to tangible success. For example:

- 17th & Guadalupe Residential Tower: Initial review of this project found a lack of pedestrian activity and minimal inclusion of local character. Using the UDGs, the Design Commission worked with the applicant to better activate the streetscape, which ultimately resulted in reducing the lobby area and incorporating a public art gallery and retail space at street level as well as providing outdoor seating.
- The Travis at 80 Red River: Initial review of this project found that it had little connection to the public realm, including the side facing Waller Creek and the adjacent hike and bike trail. The UDGs allowed the Design Commission to provide recommendations which ultimately resulted in the applicant adding a cafe, dog park, food trailer space, and bicycle and kayak storage all on the park side. Additionally, trees and landscaping were added near Red River Trailhead. These revisions will ultimately benefit not only the building tenants, but all trail users as well.
- East Tower at 84 N I35: Initial review of this project found that it could not comply with the Great Streets Program requirements due to having a TXDOT ROW. Using the UDGs, the applicant agreed to provide trees, landscaping, and street furniture on their property. This would not have happened without the UDGs and the Design Commission's review of the project.

What are we trying to accomplish?

The guidelines set expectations and incentivize high quality design and place making. Developments that invest in quality placemaking within the public realm and economic prosperity.

In order to effectively reach a broader audience and have more clarity, the guidelines must evolve to become a clear and rigorous go-to resource for the Design Commission, developers, designers and planners. In order to achieve this, we need an easy to use document with a simple graphic format (including illustrations and photos) to visually communicate the desired (and undesired) outcomes, making the UDGs clear and accessible to all applicants.

We have strategic vision, as described in Imagine Austin and our Vision Zero plan, but the implementation tools precede the vision / are outdated, or are lacking entirely.

Why is an update needed?

When the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines were renamed the Urban Design Guidelines (UDG) in 2008, the guidelines did not change. So, the current guidelines remain focused on projects in the Central Business District (CBD) and do little to address design issues with projects in other areas of the urban core or the outlying urban hubs, like Imagine Austin Regional Centers or Planned Unit Developments (PUDs). One of the many reasons an update is needed is to create a broader range of guidelines that are more applicable to projects in the expanded urban areas of Austin. Good urban design should not be limited to the Central Business District (CBD). Safety, walkability, and active streetscapes should be a shared pedestrian experience throughout the growing urban fabric of Austin.

The UDG are now 13 years old, and may not fully align with the policies that the Council has adopted during this time period. Since the current UDG were adopted, Council has enacted many new strategic documents and policies based on shared community goals and values. Therefore, a significant part of this proposed update would be to check alignment the UDG with these policies. Many of these policy directions are aimed at affordable housing, connectivity, equity, and environmental initiatives including, but not limited to: the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan, Downtown Austin Plan, Austin Core Transportation Plan (ACT), Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP), Project Connect, Strategic Housing Blueprint, Vision Zero, the soon to be adopted Climate Equity Plan, the soon to be adopted Historic Design Guidelines, Downtown Vision, East 11th and 12th Urban Renewal Plans, and the ULI National Advisory Services Report on 1-35 Corridor Austin Texas (2020).

In addition, the current UDG could benefit from more clarity and predictability. The proposed update will seek to bring clarity, predictability, and ease of use to the guidelines. It will not only make them more user-friendly for applicants, but will also provide for a simpler review process for both city staff and the Design Commission. Additionally, a simple graphic format will be used to make the UDG easier to use for a wider audience.

An update to the UDG is needed as the city continues to experience rapid growth and development of nodes outside of the Downtown area. Here are some items that should be prioritized in the update.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT:

The current Guidelines do not address environmental challenges. In fact, all that is mentioned is “Strive for environmental balance. All development should take into consideration the need to conserve energy and resources. It should also strive for a

small carbon footprint.” We should address:

1. Climate Change- includes carbon emissions and heat islands
2. Watershed Protection- includes impervious cover and run-off mitigation
3. Water and Air Quality and Conservation- includes renewables, and carbon emissions.
4. Protection and Conservation of Natural Habitat- foliage and fauna.

RESILIENCE

After the pandemic and Winter Storm Uri, there are lessons learned that could inform more resilient infrastructure strategies and designs. For example, Autonomous Digital Infrastructure is likely to become an important part of upgrading and future-proofing downtown's communications, data collection, public safety and utility systems and will need to be accommodated by regulations and guidelines.

ACTIVELY PROMOTE CIVIC ART

Civic art promotes cultural tourism, a sense of place, international prestige and recognition, and an improved quality of life for a community. Art in a city reflects the way in which the city honors spirit and soul. Public art can create a civic message that expresses community identity, spirit and culture.

ENCOURAGE A VIBRANT CULTURAL ATMOSPHERE

Arts, entertainment, and other cultural activities add richness and promotes community and social equity to our everyday lives. Such activity is an advantage to Austin because it enriches economic development, cultural tourism, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, international prestige and recognition, social service opportunities, and an improved quality of life for all citizens of Austin.

WE NEED A SYSTEM THAT HELPS GAUGE WHETHER GUIDELINES HAVE BEEN MET

To bring clarity to the process and guide applicants to meet compliance, the guidelines will include recommendations on how projects can satisfy the intent of each guideline. These recommendations may include design elements that could be incorporated into the project as well as elements that should be avoided. All recommendations will be accompanied by graphic illustrations to help better convey the ideas.

MORE DETAIL TO DELINEATE DIFFERENT TYPES OF USES IN THE PROJECTS

Due to their limited scope, the current UDG are not applicable to some project type and therefore the process of reviewing them is difficult and unpredictable. One of the major goals of the revision to the UDG is to provide guidance for different project types, including infrastructure projects, a component that is missing, and a critical initiative that the Council has already directed the Design Commission to create. By providing guidelines for a range of different project types, the UDG will be more usable and will better serve the applicants and the community. In addition to project types, the update will include provisions to better promote a mix of uses in one development. Mixed-use Developments activate the streetscape, the pedestrian experience, and should therefore be highly encouraged and supported in the revisions to the guidelines.

PROMOTE PUBLIC SPACES THAT DON'T REQUIRE AN ECONOMIC TRANSACTION

- Public Terrace, parks
- Public reading room
- Drink fountains, water filling stations
- Bike storage

The update should also look into **requiring and promoting** community spaces with public access. This means more equitable areas that don't require someone to make a purchase in order to use the space, including, but not limited to: plazas, public terraces, parks, public reading rooms, drinking fountains, water bottle filling stations, bathrooms open to the public, and bike storage. These, among other community benefits, need better representation in the guidelines to provide more diverse options for new developments to include.

BARRIERS



1. Coordinating with related policy:
We will need to subsequently update Great Streets and Subchapter E in order for this effort to be successful. All of these policies work together. We can set this in motion by starting with the Urban Design Guidelines.
2. Catering to varying context (cannot be too prescriptive):
South Congress is an example of successful urban fabric: It is eclectic, chaotic, and an incredible experience, and it does not comply with Great Streets in any way. What makes sense in an urban context might not be relevant or desirable in another context. The physical nature of each place creates a different context. The guidelines need to accommodate the variety of these places. We need to focus on nature and character. Need to be weary of being prescriptive. One size will never fit all. The tools/programs that we use to enforce standards lack flexibility.
3. Silos.

HOW THE UPDATE WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED

The following work plan outlines a set of steps crucial to the success of an inclusive and robust process to address identified deficiencies in the guidelines. Each Phase considers specific deliverables and public engagement to receive feedback and inform the final update to the guidelines.





PHASE 1

Preparation | 1-3 months

1. Creation of a draft narrative that explains the scope and purpose of the UDG and what success will look like with the update;
2. Defines the core values of the Commission and articulates Design Pillars - measurable and predictable elements that are critical to the success of an improved human experience at the intersection of public and private spaces; (Values to be based on adopted city policies, that the community already had ample input)
3. Creation of an Engagement Plan. The Engagement Plan will build on narrative elements and craft stories at various levels and enlist the assistance of “community ambassadors” to champion the benefits and value of the UDG. Ambassadors will help to distribute information and collect comments in their community. The messaging and engagement focus will be tailored around groups with a specific focus:
 - a. Technical subject matter experts, such as City Staff
 - b. Design teams - those who design and implement public and private projects using the UDG
 - c. Stakeholders representing interest groups
 - d. Outside agency representation:

Urban Design Guidelines Update

- i. TxDOT (Texas Department of Transportation)
 - ii. Cap Metro (Capital Metro)
 - iii. Austin Transit Partnership
 - iv. Waterloo Greenway
 - v. DAA (Downtown Austin Alliance)
 - vi. DANA (Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association)
 - vii. ULI (Urban Land Institute)
 - viii. AIA (American Institute of Architects)
 - ix. ASLA (American Institute of Landscape Architects)
 - x. APA (American Planning Association)
 - xi. RECA (Real Estate Council of Austin)
 - xii. Friends of Austin Neighborhoods
 - xiii. Austin Housing Coalition
 - xiv. Austin Neighborhood Council
4. Working groups will be created to identify conflicts with policy direction, and defined core values/pillars, and identify specific goals and deliverables.
 - a. Imagine Austin
 - b. Downtown Austin Plan
 - c. Austin Core Transportation Plan (ACT)
 - d. Project Connect
 - e. Organizations listed in item 3
5. Create a timeline for completion of each phase

PHASE 1 Needs

For Phase 1 to be successful, the following need to be addressed:

1. Consideration of an independent review expert to gauge the clarity, predictability, and usability of the document as it seeks to accomplish the vision of the UDG;
 - a. Who would this be? How much would it cost?
2. Strategic peer review from external subject matter experts to assist with specific guidelines; and
 - a. Who is this? Design Professionals? Cost?
3. Assistance from specific City Staff to collaborate at strategic times during the update to provide subject matter expertise on specific guidelines:
 - a. Housing and Planning
 - b. Transportation
 - c. Public Works
 - d. Economic Development
 - e. Watershed Protection
 - f. Parks and Recreation
 - g. Development Services
 - h. Equity Office
 - i. Office of Sustainability
 - j. Public Health
 - k. Austin Energy
 - l. Austin Water



Creation | 6-12 months

1. Building on work accomplished in Phase 1, share progress and alignment of Design Pillars
 - a. Stakeholder engagement
2. Re-calibrate design pillars based on engagement results
3. Formulate a final set of Design Pillars to be addressed by every project
4. Draft first set of the UDG
5. Review first draft:
 - a. Present to all working groups with targeted feedback goals
 - b. Each working group will outline specific feedback
 - c. Staff will assist with the compilation and gathering of comments out of engagement activities
6. Engage with stakeholders to get feedback on first draft
 - a. Outline specific goals/milestones for presenting first draft and gathering feedback
 - b. Outline how feedback will be used and how it will influence the evolution of the UDG
 - c. Enumerate goals and outcomes to advance towards a second draft.

7. Draft second draft of UDG based on input received from first engagement process
8. Review second draft:
 - a. Present to all working groups with targeted feedback goals
 - b. Each working group will outline specific feedback
 - c. Staff will assist with the compilation and gathering of comments out of engagement activities
9. Engage with stakeholders to get feedback on second draft
 - a. Outline specific goals/milestones for presenting second draft and gathering feedback
 - b. Outline how feedback will be used and how it will influence the evolution of the UDG
 - c. Enumerate goals and outcomes to advance towards a final draft.
10. Draft third draft of UDG based on input received from second engagement process
11. Review third draft:
 - a. Present to all working groups with targeted feedback goals
 - b. Each working group will outline specific feedback
 - c. Staff will assist with the compilation and gathering of comments out of engagement activities
12. Engage with stakeholders to get feedback on third draft Do we need to engage with stakeholders for the 3rd draft?
 - a. Outline specific goals/milestones for presenting first draft and gathering feedback
 - b. Outline how final feedback will be used and how it will influence the evolution of the UDG
 - c. Enumerate goals and outcomes to advance towards a final draft.

13. Test draft guidelines

- a. Craft design workshops to test validity of draft UDG
- b. Invite technical design teams, city staff, and specific stakeholders to collaborate in the review and application of the UDG to real places and projects
- c. Commission to review test project?
- d. Gather specific input and recommendations on how to improve the UDG for functionality, efficacy, predictability, and clarity
- e. Re-calibrate the UDG based on input and recommendations from testing workshop
- f. Re-test the updated UDG for functionality, efficacy, predictability, and clarity

14. Approval from Commission to proceed to Phase 3?

PHASE 2 Needs

For Phase 2 to be successful, the following need to be addressed:

1. Need City Staff assistance in the following areas:
 - a. Before working group meetings
 - i. Manage project
 - b. During working group meetings
 - i. Facilitate meetings
 - ii. Assist with action items from Working Group
 - iii. Communication and messaging
 - iv. Subject matter experts attend specific Working Group meetings scheduled with sufficient time to ensure availability
 - c. After working group meetings
 - i. Synthesize findings from reviews
 - ii. Make expert recommendations
 - iii. Formatting and Graphic Design
2. Need Public Engagement Firm assistance in the following areas:
 - a. Assist with crafting Engagement Plan
 - b. Evaluate stakeholder lists and make recommendations
 - c. Manage and facilitate public meetings and workshops
 - d. Assist with the gathering and tracking of comments
 - e. Analyze patterns in comments
 - f. Synthesize comments and craft a report



PHASE 3

Finalization | 6-12 months

Phase 3 envisions the finalization and creation of the UDG for consideration and presentation to city boards and commissions and City Council.

1. Prepare final version of UDG based on Phase 1 and 2 deliverables
2. Finalize graphic design elements
3. Create a website to house UDG
4. Prepare an engagement strategy for boards and commissions
5. Enumerate list of recommendations from boards and commissions
6. Schedule briefings to Council subcommittee
7. Present final version to Council for adoption

PHASE 3 Needs

- City Staff Assistance
- Prepare final document, graphic design
- Who creates, collects image content?

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