



RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

LGBTQ Quality of Life Advisory Commission

Recommendation Number: 20261019-006: Red River Cultural District Preservation

A RECOMMENDATION REQUESTING THE AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL TO ADVANCE CULTURAL PRESERVATION POLICIES FOR THE RED RIVER CULTURAL DISTRICT, RECOGNIZING ITS HISTORIC AND ONGOING IMPORTANCE TO AUSTIN'S LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY, AND PRIORITIZING THE PROTECTION OF CULTURAL SPACES, INDEPENDENT MUSIC VENUES, AND LGBTQ+ CULTURAL HERITAGE AMID DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT.

WHEREAS, the Red River Cultural District is one of Austin's most significant concentrations of independent music venues, creative businesses, and cultural spaces, contributing to the City's identity as the Live Music Capital of the World while providing essential opportunities for artistic expression, community connection, and cultural exchange; and

WHEREAS, the Red River Cultural District has a longstanding and significant connection to Austin's LGBTQ+ history, serving for decades as a home for queer nightlife, lesbian-owned establishments, drag performance, alternative music, and communities that have historically faced exclusion from more traditional cultural and social spaces; and

WHEREAS, the address at 900 Red River Street exemplifies this cultural legacy, having housed Chances, a pioneering lesbian bar and music venue from 1982 to 1994, and serving since 2014 as the home of Cheer Up Charlies, a prominent LGBTQ+-owned and operated venue that continues the location's tradition of creating space for queer community, artistic expression, and cultural celebration; and

WHEREAS, venues throughout the district, including Cheer Up Charlies, Elysium, Barbarella, and Swan Dive, have supported LGBTQ+ performers, drag artists, DJs, musicians, and community events, providing important platforms for queer visibility, creative expression, and economic opportunity; and

WHEREAS, LGBTQ+ cultural spaces serve functions extending far beyond entertainment, providing opportunities for community organizing, mutual support, identity affirmation, intergenerational connection, and belonging, particularly for LGBTQ+ people who may experience discrimination or social isolation elsewhere; and

WHEREAS, preserving these spaces is especially important amid ongoing political and social pressures affecting LGBTQ+ Texans, as the loss of physical places for queer gathering and expression represents

not only cultural and economic displacement but also a loss of community infrastructure, history, visibility, and belonging; and

WHEREAS, Austin's rapid downtown redevelopment, increasing property values, rising operating costs, and loss of independent venues threaten the continued existence of the cultural ecosystem that has supported generations of artists, workers, small businesses, and LGBTQ+ communities along Red River Street; and

WHEREAS, recent closures within the district, including Empire Control Room & Garage, Koriente, Feels So Good, and Marlow, together with the announced closure of Valhalla and the listing for sale of the property housing Elysium and The 13th Floor, demonstrate the urgent vulnerability of Austin's independent cultural spaces; and

WHEREAS, an independent 2026 economic impact study, as reported by the Red River Cultural District, found that the district generated more than \$2.3 billion in economic impact over five years, supported more than 3,700 full-time jobs, and produced more than \$170 million in labor income, demonstrating that cultural preservation is also an economic development priority; and

WHEREAS, the Austin City Council has previously directed the development of preservation mechanisms for the Red River Cultural District through Resolution Nos. 20220728-094 and 20240229-060, including exploration of a cultural district overlay, yet critical policy protections remain unfinished; and

WHEREAS, the Red River Cultural District's September 2026 open letter calls for immediate implementation of the Cultural District Overlay, meaningful cultural-preservation measures within the Downtown Density Bonus Phase II, Transfer of Development Rights Policy, and Central City District Plan, and mechanisms to reinvest value generated by redevelopment into the preservation and creation of cultural spaces; and

WHEREAS, the preservation of LGBTQ+ cultural spaces should be considered an essential component of equitable planning, historic preservation, economic development, and community well-being, recognizing that cultural identity and collective memory cannot be fully replaced once the places that sustain them are lost;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the City of Austin LGBTQ+ Quality of Life Advisory Commission recommends that the Austin City Council:

- 1. Expedite the development and implementation of the Red River Cultural District Overlay**, consistent with previously adopted Council resolutions, and ensure that the overlay recognizes and supports the district's historic and ongoing significance to LGBTQ+ communities, independent artists, and culturally significant businesses.
- 2. Prioritize meaningful cultural-preservation and anti-displacement measures**, within the Downtown Density Bonus Phase II, Transfer of Development Rights Policy, and Central City District Plan, including incentives and mechanisms to retain existing independent venues, protect legacy cultural businesses, and provide affordable space for artistic and cultural activities.

- 3. Explore mechanisms to reinvest the economic value generated through downtown redevelopment into cultural preservation**, including community benefits, development incentives, and other strategies that support the retention, replacement, or creation of independent music venues and LGBTQ+-inclusive cultural spaces.
- 4. Explicitly recognize and document the LGBTQ+ cultural heritage of the Red River Cultural District**, in relevant City planning and preservation efforts, including the histories of LGBTQ+ establishments, performers, cultural organizations, and gathering spaces, and incorporate these considerations into future cultural district policies and investments.
- 5. Engage the LGBTQ+ community, cultural venue operators, independent artists, and the LGBTQ+ Quality of Life Advisory Commission**, in the development and implementation of preservation strategies, ensuring that LGBTQ+ cultural spaces and historically marginalized creative communities are meaningfully represented in decisions affecting the future of the district.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the LGBTQ+ Quality of Life Advisory Commission affirms that preserving the Red River Cultural District is not solely a matter of protecting nightlife or supporting economic activity, but of safeguarding an irreplaceable part of Austin's LGBTQ+ cultural history, creative identity, and community infrastructure for present and future generations.

Date of Approval: October 19, 2026

Motioned By: Commissioner Brown

Seconded By: Commissioner Fierro-Pérez

Vote: 12-0

For: Chair Coyne, Vice Chair Benson, Commissioners Bandit, Brown, Daniel, Davis, Fierro-Pérez, Johnson, Knutson, Neal, Pituk, Rivas

Against: None

Abstain: None

Off the dais: None

Absent: Vice Chair McLeod, Commissioners Krueger, Nguyen,

Attest: *Ryan Sperling*

Ryan Sperling, LGBTQ Quality of Life Advisory Commission Staff Liaison