

1997: The Watershed Year for Neighborhood Planning in Austin

The City of Austin passed a resolution on May 21, 1997 that proclaimed that it was in the public's best interest to be represented in the planning process for the City of Austin and that this goal could be best accomplished by involving neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations. Furthermore, the City was made responsible for assisting neighborhoods in developing an effective planning process and to this end established the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program to create neighborhood area plans that could be approved by the Planning Commission and ultimately by the City Council. This paper will focus on the events preceding and immediately following the City's landmark resolution with the hope that examining this time period in greater detail will contribute to the task at hand of how to again improve on the neighborhood planning process.

The entity that is arguably the most responsible for the current level of involvement of the City of Austin in neighborhood planning is the now defunct Citizens' Planning Committee, which was appointed by the Austin City Council in September of 1994 and consisted of professionals in the planning related fields as well as citizens from across the city. The committee consisted of a diverse group that had the expertise necessary to devise new ways for the City of Austin to prepare for growth in the future. The Citizens' Planning Committee findings were initially presented to the Austin City Council in a report submitted on January 19, 1995. The following pages will highlight some of the more important findings and provide a summary of what is considered a

groundbreaking analysis of the state of planning in Austin in the mid-1990's and the identification of steps that were necessary to improve the state of the city.

The report was written under the basic premise of exposing an inadequate planning system and confronting the major stereotypes that committee members felt were stifling successful planning in Austin. The following passage captures these sentiments:

“The Citizens’ Planning Committee decries the characterizations and stereotypes that fractionalize Austin in its time of greatest need.

These stereotypes include:

- Developers are intractable and *only* interested in profits.
- Neighborhood groups are obstructionist and refuse to accept *any* change.
- Environmental groups are unrealistic and blindly fight *all* growth.
- City planners are bureaucrats who are *out of touch* with the community.

It is time to confront these myths and the reactionary, visionless system Austin has developed. We believe that Austin is a very special and vibrant community. Its citizens are richly diverse, thoughtful and innovative. We believe that Austin has the energy and ability to create its own road, one that will produce both a built and natural environment, healthy for and worthy of its people.”

(Committee, 1995, 2)

Confronting these stereotypes head on was an admirable call to action for the City Council and all that were involved professionally in the planning of Austin. The report continued to establish twelve recommendations that became regarded as nearly infallible principles that could help guide efforts to improve the City’s inadequate planning processes.

The recommendations are listed below in their entirety, which is somewhat lengthy, but necessary due to their role as a guiding force for the City of Austin’s reexamination of their comprehensive planning efforts and adoption of a leadership role regarding neighborhood planning for the city.

“In order to produce and sustain a livable city with a viable tax base, all of the following must occur:

- I. The development regulations and permitting process must be simplified. They should be predictable, accountable, consistent, and clear in intent.
- II. The planning and development regulations should be coordinated with a comprehensive, integrated neighborhood association system.

- III. The comprehensive planning and development regulations should begin with integrative community plans created through neighborhood participation. This process should begin with a review of existing planning tools and documents including sector plans, AustinPlan, corridor studies, NCCD, overlay studies and Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team m (R/UDAT).
- IV. Mobility/transportation planning should be fully integrated into and compatible with land use planning and the development process.
- V. The planning and development process should encourage quality, transit-oriented mixed-use development.
- VI. The Austin Urban Core, as the heart of the region, must receive special attention to maintain and enhance attractiveness and encourage redevelopment as a vital, unique multi-use community (Central Business District and central city community).
- VII. Reinvestment, redevelopment, and remediation in East Austin must be encouraged and facilitated by the City's planning and development process.
- VIII. Consideration needs to be given to the disproportional impact of negative environmental facilities on low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.
- IX. The City needs to make use of economic incentives, infrastructure and investment to coordinate and encourage development consistent with its vision.
- X. New development processes should create minimal environmental impacts and provide interface between the residents and nature.
- XI. The City of Austin should encourage, facilitate, and participate with communities in the MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area) to coordinate and plan mutually beneficial regional growth.
- XII. Taxing jurisdictions and governmental entities should coordinate in order to facilitate comprehensive planning."

(Committee, 1995, 3)

These recommendations provide a thorough overview of the issues that the committee felt must be considered when discussing how to improve the planning process in Austin.

The report argues that the recommendations should be viewed as a whole and that implementing some and not others would hurt the holistic nature of a truly comprehensive planning effort. Recommendations two and three are the principles most directly related to planning at the neighborhood level and are probably responsible for the explosion of interest in neighborhood planning that developed over the years following this initial report. Again, the recommendations are meant to be considered holistically, which means that along with empowering the neighborhood planning process the committee members give equal weight to simplifying the development review process and ensuring that environmental interests are also prioritized.

The report continues by expanding on each of the twelve recommendations. For the purposes of this paper, we will look at some of the more relevant findings concerning the neighborhood planning process. The committee states that there are many potential actions that could be undertaken to improve the planning process at the neighborhood level, including implementing a system that provides for a single democratically controlled neighborhood association over a defined geographic area, providing training for neighborhood associations, and ensuring that staff and resources are provided by the city to encourage the creation of neighborhood plans. The report also suggests looking to successes in Portland, OR as a potential model for organizing a system of neighborhood associations in Austin (Committee, 1995, 9-11). The 1995 report concludes by discussing some of the contextual conditions that gave rise to the twelve recommendations and advises the City Council to seek additional input wherever necessary and to revisit with the Citizens' Planning Committee to facilitate future implementation.

The Citizens' Planning Committee followed up on these issues with their final report in April 1996. More than a year after reporting their initial findings, the committee restated their twelve recommendations and began to discuss more detailed actions that could be undertaken to implement these suggestions. The 1996 report begins by reiterating five equally important core principles that all were drawn from the previous report. Upon further examination these five principles are best addressed by grouping them within one of three greater concerns: simplifying the development review process; preserving the unique character of neighborhoods and empowering them in the planning process; and ensuring that growth is pursued in harmony with the natural environment,

transportation, and infrastructure needs (Committee, 1996, 2). The principles included in the opening statement of the 1996 report are similar to the stereotypes first discussed in 1995, which clarify that there are really three main constituencies being considered in these reports: the development community, neighborhood groups, and environmentalists. The role of the city seems to be to strike a balance between the three and to create a comprehensive planning process that is acceptable for all parties.

Focusing on neighborhood groups, the report states that at the time of writing there were more than 400 different groups, no one really had an exact number, and that it was difficult for the city to incorporate the expertise found within these groups due to disorganization, overlapping jurisdictions, and often times contradicting missions (Committee, 1996, 5). To this end, the committee had multiple action items that all deviated from the original twelve recommendations with actions that apply to neighborhood planning including the creation and maintenance of a neighborhood association database, assigning a community development coordinator, and establishing neighborhood plans as a key component of the citywide comprehensive plan (Committee, 1996, 11-13). The report concludes by highlighting the source material for the report which consisted of more than sixty actions that were passed by the Citizens' Planning Committee before they dissolved on February 29, 1996. The source material related to the neighborhood planning process will be discussed below.

The major findings following numerous studies were that most neighborhood organizations had informal organization and means of communication, that the City did not commit the resources necessary to track the actions of the neighborhood organizations, and that the lack of an effective organizational framework was creating

confusion at all levels and contributing to the impasse between neighborhood groups and the development community. An assessment of these findings concluded that the City was the only entity capable of changing the unsavory environment created by the systemic problems with the structure of the current neighborhood organizations (Committee, 1996, 30). Conspicuously absent from these discussions were efforts already underway in Austin by entities like the Austin Neighborhood Council (ANC) to organize the neighborhood associations scattered throughout the city. It seems as if committee members were overwhelmed by the current state of affairs and felt that a City of Austin initiative would provide a fresh start and make the neighborhood planning process easier to integrate with the other facets of comprehensive planning.

The Citizens' Planning Committee reports were at the core of a reexamination of the state of comprehensive planning in Austin and the recommendations regarding neighborhood organizations were eventually adopted by the City. As stated in the introduction, the City of Austin passed a resolution on May 21, 1997 to officially establish the importance of the neighborhood planning process and to initiate the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program. The resolution in its entirety is included in the appendix of this report. This event represents the point in which the City began to take a more active role in organizing the neighborhood planning process and is a landmark for neighborhood planning in Austin. 1997 represents a turning point in the state of neighborhood planning in Austin, just as this paragraph signifies a change in focus in this paper from the work that contributed to the adoption of neighborhood planning as a purview of the City to the actions that were taken immediately following the landmark resolution. To this end, the discussion will turn to a follow-up report drafted by a

reincarnation of the Citizens' Planning Committee (now referred to as the Citizens' Planning and Implementation Committee), events happening in Austin that galvanized the neighborhood planning process in 1997, the implementation of a citywide survey in 1998, and a brief introduction to some of the first neighborhoods designated to participate in the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program.

The purpose of the Citizens' Planning and Implementation Committee report drafted in September 1997 is perhaps most accurately summarized by the graphic of the capitol building on the cover which is encircled by the words "Maintain Momentum". The report provides a progress report on the actions items introduced in the previous Citizens' Planning Committee reports and praises the City for progress on numerous initiatives, including the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program, but cautions that there is still work to do as the development of a comprehensive planning framework for Austin moves forward. By reinforcing action items from previous reports as well as introducing some new suggestions, the 1997 report hopes to maintain progress and ensure that efforts are moving forward.

Concerning the neighborhood planning process, the 1997 report provides follow up information to the resolution passed by the City stating that more than fifteen neighborhoods had submitted applications to participate in the pilot program which would enable two or three pilot projects to move forward (Committee, 1997, 10). The recommendations that follow are similar to those found in previous reports and include maintaining a neighborhood organization database to assist in resolving boundary issues, appointing a Community Involvement Coordinator, developing a Community Assistance Center, and encouraging that neighborhood plans be adopted as part of a citywide plan

and that opportunities identified in the creation of these plans are acted upon (Committee, 1997, 11). The report also provides updates on other facets of the comprehensive process, reinforcing that neighborhood planning is only a part of the greater picture, albeit an important one.

Considering the importance of maintaining momentum as a necessary facet of reforming Austin's neighborhood planning process, it seems worthwhile to consider some major events that were occurring in Austin around 1997 and how they may have contributed to a climate where comprehensive planning was more likely to be embraced by city officials and citizens alike. The broad contextual issue at this time was the successes of high tech companies in Austin and the breakneck speed of population growth that coincided with the burgeoning economy. Within this environment, two events stick out as especially important to the citizens of Austin: the monumental task of reintegrating the Robert Mueller Municipal Airport (RMMA) site into the city and protesting against the proposed Triangle development at 45th, Lamar, and Guadalupe which would continue for years following the introduction of a development proposal in 1997.

Looking back at the history of the RMMA project, we can see that many of the groundbreaking moments in the evolution of a master plan for the area took place in 1997 including the formation of the Mueller Neighborhoods Coalition, the awarding of a master planning contract by the City Council to the ROMA design group, and the appointment of an RMMA Advisory Group and City Council Subcommittee (Robert Mueller, 2006). These groups began working on a reclamation/reuse plan for the area until the airport officially closed in May of 1999 and the same groups began to work on

implementation efforts. It is arguable that the pursuit of such a high profile project in Austin contributed to raising the public consciousness regarding the benefits of planning and made it easier for the City to move forward with adopting resolutions and taking actions to strengthen comprehensive planning efforts in Austin.

A similar impact can be drawn from the protests resulting from the proposed Triangle development, which was seen as bringing unwanted big box development to a unique area of Austin. An Austin Chronicle editorial reflects on how these events may have been empowering to neighborhood groups when examining the history of the Triangle development,

I suppose we've learned, or at least Triangle developer Tom Terkel has learned, that building something in Central Austin can be a real bitch, but I'm not sure that qualifies as new information. The neighborhoods, though, have learned something similar, which might be a genuine lesson. The Triangle saga erupted at the dawn of Austin's embrace of neighborhood planning (after the defining work of the Citizens Planning Committee, but before the city initiated its first pilot plans).

(Clark-Madison, 2004)

It is impossible to measure exactly how much impact a controversial development can have on the strengthening of neighborhoods, but it is not difficult to see themes like identity, ownership, and a call to action being exhibited by citizens in this instance. Crediting the importance of rallying events as a way to increase participation and maintain momentum when implementing a new neighborhood planning process or examining the state of comprehensive planning as a whole is not a farfetched concept and could be incorporated into future strategies.

Perhaps in response to the favorable planning climate, a citywide survey called the Austin Community Agenda was implemented in 1998 to gauge the quality of life and

levels of community involvement as a way to provide an unbiased assessment of how citizens of Austin perceive their surroundings and would like to move forward. A similar survey was undertaken in 1995, but was smaller in scale and focused solely on East Austin (Austin Community Survey, 1995). Major findings of the 1998 survey included revealing that more than 80 percent of Austin residents surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of life in Austin. Furthermore, the survey determined that residents could generally be grouped into three distinct groups: Community Optimists, Urban Environmentalists, and Nostalgic Individualists in response to the prevalent attitudes unearthed by the survey. These findings created some debate and what some would argue were negligible results, but they continued to provide momentum for comprehensive planning in Austin and the city-led Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process programs.

The three neighborhoods selected to initially participate in the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program were the East Cesar Chavez and Chestnut neighborhoods from East Austin and the Dawson neighborhood from South Austin. Some of the neighborhood issues identified in the Citizens' Planning Committee reports like the unmanageable number of neighborhood associations and overlapping boundaries created difficulties throughout the planning process in the East Cesar Chavez neighborhood as some groups felt they were being marginalized. The planning process for this neighborhood would not result in a neighborhood plan until three years after the project began. The Dawson neighborhood completed Austin's first neighborhood plan in 1998, which continued to be adopted by the City Council and incorporated into the city's comprehensive plan (Trower, 1998).

Despite difficulties in some neighborhood areas, the Pilot Neighborhood Planning Process program was successful in empowering neighborhood groups to create plans to be adopted by the City Council and allowed citizens to exert greater control over the direction of growth in their own neighborhoods. Today, more than twenty-five neighborhoods have completed neighborhood plans and most of the city's urban core has either finalized a plan or is currently involved in the process. There has been impressive progress since the City resolution in 1997 to take a more active role in neighborhood planning in Austin, but the current process is not without faults. In many instances, the creation of a neighborhood plan can become uncomfortably political with neighborhood associations competing for influence and distracting participants from accomplishing true collaboration and meaningful progress. Although the neighborhood planning process could undeniably be improved, the framework established by the Citizens' Planning Committee is a solid beginning.

Hopefully the preceding examination of the studies, events, and actions that culminated with the City of Austin taking a leadership position in the neighborhood planning process will clarify how the current state of neighborhood planning came to be and perhaps shed some light on how this process could be improved. Looking around Austin today, one wonders if the development of SH130 or the efforts of Envision Central Texas may again raise the issue of planning within the public consciousness and allow for the proposal and pursuit of innovative solutions to difficult problems. Will neighborhood groups accept the City as a facilitator and not as a competitor? Have we overcome the stereotypes that were said to impede successful planning in 1995? Questions like these are important to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of the

contemporary neighborhood planning process and discussing measures that may be introduced to make the process more effective.

Sources

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