

WHEN AUSTIN TOMORROW BECAME YESTERDAY'S NEWS, Executive Summary  
Larry Quick, February 13, 2006

This report looks at the Neighborhood Planning Process in Austin from the perspectives and recollections of some key individuals. Jackie Goodman was on the Planning and Zoning Commission for 6 years, elected to the City Council, and served as Mayor Pro Tem. Carol Barrett was Director of Neighborhood Planning for the City of Austin until 2001 and represents the staff. A person's own words are often the best testimony to historic events. "JG" denotes a quotation from Jackie Goodman. "CB" is a quotation from Carol Barrett.

Introductory Statement by Jackie Goodman

The Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan was intended to guide and manage growth. State law enables master planning, and "Austin is very good at planning, but not very good at implementing." (JG) Without a forum and procedure for the neighborhood stakeholders to address local planning issues, the "process becomes a political one where the focus is one of winning and losing rather than good planning. "You have to be able to look at things in more of a big picture view and only something like neighborhood planning ...gives you the tools to do that."(JG) The stakeholders (renters, landlords, homeowners, business, church or civic organization) in the neighborhoods could approach a problem or opportunity in a bottom-up analysis, rather than having a solution imposed from city government in a top-down manner. Demographic and social trends can slowly change the character of a neighborhood so that stakeholders may not even be aware that their proposal impacts some other group of citizens. (JG)

Introductory Statement by Carol Barrett

A different perspective comes from Carol Barrett. "There were two overarching problems with neighborhood planning in Austin. First, there is no comprehensive plan with universal goals for the city. Therefore each neighborhood is pretty much free to go it alone. And that was very evident from the earliest stages. Second, the support for what you were doing from city management was thin."(CB)

Planning Process Limitations

One of the difficulties of using neighborhood planning to resolve local issues is that neighborhoods must be stitched together in city-wide plans. An example is the transportation plan. (JG) "A lot of this is based on the transportation master plan, and the neighborhoods don't feel they have enough input into it."(JG) "Staff, however, decided, without telling council, that it would not be (included). "A street doesn't just go for a few blocks. There are destinations and generations of traffic points which have nothing to do with the neighborhood or are fed by the neighborhood."(JG) "The transportation issue must be looked at in terms of the immediate and local impact in the neighborhood and also the larger impact."(JG)

"What we learned from the very first neighborhood plan was that it had to have a specific implementation strategy associated with it."(CB)

Changes in the Process

"That was before the Smart Growth phase, pre-Kirk Watson. Kirk came in with things he wanted to see happen, things that were happening too slowly."(JG) "So there is a broad range of issues all interrelated that Kirk brought under the umbrella of Smart Growth. "The economic downturn put some things off track, but the basic premise was set."(JG)

Gentrification is an example of this. How can the neighborhood planning process deal with such a contentious concept? "There is going to be gentrification because a part of the city that may not have been looked at before as a viable place to live would now be, both for the residents and any newcomers. The fine line is how you keep it from pricing out the current residents. Density is a similar issue. But the neighborhood planning process was supposed to give neighborhoods the opportunity to choose the type of density to increase. Some neighborhoods truly cannot do it."(JG)

There were problems. "You had turnover everywhere. You had turnover in council, turnover in management, in neighborhood leaders. It became someone else's turn to give up their time. This led to a loss of understanding the context and histories of the plans. "It was understood without even writing it

where you were going. Then 5 or 10 years later, someone looking at that map for any reason wouldn't have any idea of that rationale or nuance.”(JG)

#### Designation of Neighborhoods and Participation for Planning Purposes

Optimizing the size of neighborhood planning areas led to another dimension of problems. “The reason for going into regional or combining district planning, so to speak, where more than one neighborhood come together is because legitimately there are arterials, etc. that impact all the neighborhoods. A more practical reason why the areas were combined to include a lot of neighborhoods was because it was a very slow process, very agonizing. You always had people who, after a planning process had been in progress for 2 or 3 years, say, “I never knew this thing was happening!”(JG)

“Another problem is that neighborhoods define themselves as excluding business. One of the innovations of the neighborhood planning process is to show that these commercial corridors have huge impacts on the neighborhoods.”(CB)

“Issues of importance change. Interests change when you come away from a lot of immediate, in-your-face zoning changes. I think it would be really good if there were some document of the history of each neighborhood.”(JG)

“There was failure on both sides. City staff was not as effective as they could be. Neighborhoods were very close minded to accept real participation by professional planners. There were some neighborhoods where it worked really well. There was a lot of willingness to think about growth and change.”(CB)

#### Successes of the Neighborhood Planning Process

A major positive benefit was the realization that the existing land use development code was inadequate “The whole code was supposed to be revamped and through neighborhood planning was supposed to create an alternative code to show the uniqueness of their planning area.”(JG) “Austin did the right thing in their new urban design rules.”(CB)

Another concept introduced was subdistricts. This would ensure that the nature and character of the neighborhoods would be taken into account. Staff seemed to oppose subdistricts because the interpretation of zoning and enforcement was more difficult.”(JG)

#### Future Land Use Maps

There is ambivalence about Future Land Use Maps or FLUMs. There is no provision in the land development codes for FLUMS “FLUMS will really be the way the people from now on will get the neighborhood plan.”(JG)

This has also led to some disingenuousness. “Sometimes staff, in all the hurry and flurry of taking a neighborhood plan to council, has changed what you thought was there on that FLUM. But with South River City residents, the FLUM did not reflect what they thought they had come to agreement on. So those things still can get by.”(JG)

#### Recommendations

“There are a couple of things if I were reinventing neighborhood planning. One, the city administration would have to seriously embrace neighborhood planning. By that there are both rewards and penalties. By rewards I mean, if you do it right and on time, the city will get serious about the backlog of unimproved areas in your neighborhood and we're going to make some capital improvements.”(CB)

The neighborhood planning process has lost an important capability, the connection to the Capital Improvement Project list. Each neighborhood suggested their needs to enter them into the system. That is not happening anymore.”(JG)

#### Concluding Statements

“One thing that's a real problem with doing neighborhood planning – physically and emotionally, it is the toughest work that goes on in planning. Typically, these jobs attract the youngest planners. They are just excited and think it's going to be just like it was in graduate school. Yet these are the people with the fewest coping skills (and the least experience).”(CB)

Many good things were hoped to happen. So, all those things didn't happen. I think by evolution they will happen, because there are still enough people who remember the old vision. But some

neighborhoods will not have that, or they won't have it forever. Those neighborhoods with the initiative for planning give me hope for the future of neighborhood planning.”(JG)

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This report looks at the Neighborhood Planning Process in Austin from the perspectives and recollections of some key individuals. Jackie Goodman was on the Planning and Zoning Commission for 6 years, elected to the City Council, and served as Mayor Pro Tem. Carol Barrett was Director of Neighborhood Planning for the City of Austin until 2001 and represents the staff. A person's own words are often the best testimony to historic events. "JG" denotes a quotation from Jackie Goodman. "CB" is a quotation from Carol Barrett.

### Introductory Statement by Jackie Goodman

The Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan was intended to guide and manage growth. State law enables master planning, and "Austin is very good at planning, but not very good at implementing." (JG) The specific zoning cases which caused disagreement in the neighborhoods were being settled at the Planning and Zoning Commission or the City Council. Neighborhood activists or a business interest group would work within the political system to solve planning problems. "At various time, things would get passed in the land development code which really were in the best interests of only one neighborhood, because that was the neighborhood that was under fire or that was a situation that was in the spotlight. The code would be amended to reflect the situation. Maybe other neighborhoods wouldn't benefit by it but they hadn't been in any kind of public forum."(JG) Without a forum and procedure for the neighborhood stakeholders to address local planning issues, the "process becomes a political one where the focus is one of winning and losing rather than good planning." "... it's better to have a situation where all the stakeholders have gotten together and worked out at least some of their issues, and understand

each other's bottom line.”(JG) “You have to be able to look at things in more of a big picture view and only something like neighborhood planning ...gives you the tools to do that.”(JG)

“We started looking at it as a quilt. You just naturally are able to see the other boundaries for planning into a reasonable real estate interests within that area have common issues to work and some peripheral impacts on each other.”(JG) The stakeholders (renters, landlords, homeowners, business, church or civic organization) in the neighborhoods could approach a problem or opportunity in a bottom-up analysis, rather than having a solution imposed from city government in a top-down manner. Demographic and social trends can slowly change the character of a neighborhood so that stakeholders may not even be aware that their proposal impacts some other group of citizens. (JG)

#### Introductory Statement by Carol Barrett

A different perspective comes from Carol Barrett. She speaks with the experience of a staffer, “For two years, when you called the City of Austin phone number for Neighborhood Planning, you reached me.”(CB) “There were two overarching problems with neighborhood planning in Austin. First, there is no comprehensive plan with universal goals for the city. Therefore each neighborhood is pretty much free to go it alone. And that was very evident from the earliest stages.”(CB) “The origin for the neighborhood planning process was a city initiative and was not undertaken by management program. Second, the support for what you were doing from city management was thin. In fact, the city manager's office created a competing program called the office of neighborhood services.”(CB)

“In order to get the neighborhood planning process started, it went into very high profile areas of the city to demonstrate how it could bring a community together. But that meant we were in neighborhoods with intractable histories.”(CB)

### Planning Process Limitations

One of the difficulties of using neighborhood planning to resolve local issues is that neighborhoods must be stitched together in city-wide plans. An example is the transportation plan. (JG) “A lot of this is based on the transportation master plan, and the neighborhoods don’t feel they have enough input into it.”(JG) This was complicated when the City Council directed city staff to implement neighborhood planning. Their charge included transportation. However, “either the direction was not understood or it was a direction the bureaucracy did not agree with.” “Staff, however, decided, without telling council, that it would not be (included). So for those first neighborhoods starting the neighborhood planning process it was not allowed”(JG) “For Austin with a city manager form of government, policy makers do not have the authority to monitor the operations of departments and personnel.”(JG) Thus the implementation of the neighborhood planning process did not include transportation issues. “A street doesn’t just go for a few blocks. There are destinations and generations of traffic points which have nothing to do with the neighborhood or are fed by the neighborhood.”(JG) “The transportation issue must be looked at in terms of the immediate and local impact in the neighborhood and also the larger impact.”(JG) “There’s never an easy solution, even if you think you have the perfect plan.”(JG) “Some neighborhoods went beyond the marching orders given by staff. They included traffic calming into their plans, but that was as close as it got.”(JG)

“What we learned from the very first neighborhood plan was that it had to have a specific implementation strategy associated with it.”(CB)

“The framework was supposed to be laid out within the neighborhood planning process. Also some social issues were supposed to be addressed. Some neighborhoods are planning for their sustainability in a broader sense than just land use issues, like medical care, clinics, social services, parks, things like that. Or it may not be as high a priority for them like large lots, big recreation centers. But some, especially when the first enterprise grants were available from the federal government, were supposed to incorporate all of those things for neighborhoods who didn’t want to look at that. That’s where staff stepped on it and it didn’t happen.”(JG)

### Changes in the Process

“That was before the Smart Growth phase, pre-Kirk Watson. Kirk came in with things he wanted to see happen, things that were happening too slowly.”(JG) “So there is a broad range of issues all interrelated that Kirk brought under the umbrella of Smart Growth. If you can get all those things on track at the same time, even if they kind of fall to the side of the road for a time along the way, sooner or later you come up with a livable, sustainable city.”(JG) “The economic downturn put some things off track, but the basic premise was set. I think the expectations were set so some things are now taken for granted that once were opposed.”(JG)

Gentrification is an example of this. How can the neighborhood planning process deal with such a contentious concept? “This partly education and partly, what I was talking about by taking the bigger picture, having a forum where all the stakeholders can come and talk, rather than coming with positions in cement ready to fight.”(JG) “There is going to be gentrification because a part of the city that may not have been looked at before as a viable place to live would

now be, both for the residents and any newcomers. The fine line is how you keep it from pricing out the current residents.”(JG)

Density is a similar issue. “The density issue is very much broadly defined and the argument for that is urban sprawl.”(JG) “But if you are going to have density, if you are going to introduce density to the urban setting which has always been a small town or a suburb type development then those neighborhood folks who have invested what they have and don’t want to change what they have, in most cases will fight extra density.”(JG) “But the neighborhood planning process was supposed to give neighborhoods the opportunity to choose the type of density to increase. Some neighborhoods truly cannot do it.”(JG) “Yet in my opinion and some others, it can be done.”(JG)

There were problems. “You had turnover everywhere. You had turnover in council, turnover in management, in neighborhood leaders. It became someone else’s turn to give up their time.”(JG) This led to a loss of understanding the context and histories of the plans. “Maybe the plan that was put forward by staff that was adopted had a lot of things that were understood by council, neighborhood and staff at that time. They weren’t actually written down. It was a given.”(JG) “It was understood without even writing it where you were going. Then 5 or 10 years later, someone looking at that map for any reason wouldn’t have any idea of that rationale or nuance.”(JG)

### Designation of Neighborhoods and Participation for Planning Purposes

Optimizing the size of neighborhood planning areas led to another dimension of problems. “The reason for going into regional or combining district planning, so to speak, where more than one neighborhood come together is because legitimately there are arterials, etc. that

impact all the neighborhoods.”(JG) “Planning for one would mean that stakeholders need to be involved in that, which would bring in other neighborhoods.”(JG) “A more practical reason why the areas were combined to include a lot of neighborhoods was because it was a very slow process, very agonizing. It would take a very long time for people to work through things. You always had people who, after a planning process had been in progress for 2 or 3 years, say, “I never knew this thing was happening!” And they come in too late.”(JG)

“Another problem is that neighborhoods define themselves as excluding business. One of the innovations of the neighborhood planning process is to show that these commercial corridors have huge impacts on the neighborhoods. Business people are physically in the neighborhoods as much as the home-owners are.”(CB)

“Issues of importance change. Interests change when you come away from a lot of immediate, in-your-face zoning changes which were the genesis of your neighborhood’s desire to plan. When all of that is gone, when the pressure and stress is not there, those issues fade away into the issues of today. So although you can’t mandate this, I think it would be really good if there were some document of the history of each neighborhood.”(JG)

“There was failure on both sides. City staff was not as effective as they could be. Neighborhoods were very close minded to accept real participation by professional planners. There were some neighborhoods where it worked really well. Demographics seemed important. Areas with younger residents, like North Loop, where the planners and the residents were about the same age, there was a great dynamic. Also areas that didn’t begin the conversation with, “Now this is what it was like 30 years ago.” And areas characterized by high degrees of immigration. There was a lot of willingness to think about growth and change.”(CB)

## Successes of the Neighborhood Planning Process

A major positive benefit was the realization that the existing land use development code was inadequate. “For instance, the kind of zoning categories were supposed to be able to be worked on by individual neighborhoods, because tools did not exist for developing anything besides post-World War suburban subdivisions.”(JG) “New zoning categories were created and new planning concepts were introduced.”(JG) “The whole code was supposed to be revamped and through neighborhood planning was supposed to create an alternative code to show the uniqueness of their planning area.”(JG) “Austin did the right thing in their new urban design rules. This improves the quality of life for all.”(CB)

Another concept introduced was subdistricts. “When you’re talking about a lot of neighborhoods in the same planning area and they bear no similarities in character to each other in architecture, lot size, building materials or age.”(JG) So neighborhoods were combined to aggregate into larger planning areas. This was not immediately accepted. “Staff did not want to add subdistricts to the mix, even though the basis of the process was to have something like a Conservation Combining District without an historical element. This would ensure that the nature and character of the neighborhoods would be taken into account. You have some neighborhoods which plan together which do not resemble each other at all. Cherrywood had large lot, very suburban, kind of rural-suburban and they didn’t want to have that kind of thing in their neighborhood. Obviously you must allow diversity within your planning area, because you are planning for more than a single area.”(JG) Staff seemed to oppose subdistricts because the interpretation of zoning and enforcement was more difficult.

## Future Land Use Maps

There is ambivalence about Future Land Use Maps or FLUMs. There is no provision in the land development codes for FLUMS. “In essence they do exist, because the Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan did not have zoning in it and the Austin Plan planned by intensity rather than traditional zoning, and to a great degree still we do have the zoning changes the time of adoption of the plan to reflect what’s been discussed and what’s come to agreement on the issues.”(JG)

“FLUMS will really be the way the people from now on will get the neighborhood plan. But it’s not included in the land use plan so it’s not prescribed or a process for change for what should be included on the FLUM. It’s just a nice easy map to look at with pretty colors for land uses.”(JG)

This has also led to some disingenuousness. “Sometimes staff, in all the hurry and flurry of taking a neighborhood plan to council, has changed what you thought was there on that FLUM. And since the areas of planning are large, it’s not something that is easily noticed. The colors look pretty much like you remembered it, the areas look pretty much like you remembered it. But with South River City residents, the FLUM did not reflect what they thought they had come to agreement on. Within the city management hierarchy, one of those changes had been made at the request of ACC but nobody knew about it until the day it came up to council and then they looked at the map and said, “Wow! What is this? Where did this come from?” So those things still can get by.”(JG)

## Recommendations

“There are a couple of things if I were reinventing neighborhood planning. One, the city administration would have to seriously embrace neighborhood planning. By that there are both rewards and penalties. By rewards I mean, if you do it right and on time, the city will get serious about the backlog of unimproved areas in your neighborhood and we’re going to make some capital improvements.”(CB)

“In contrast to other cities doing neighborhood planning the city council should say we want every neighborhood to be willing to accept its fair share of growth. And if you accept this amount of growth, you’ll get this in exchange for that. And if you accept that amount of growth, you’ll get even better stuff. And you know what, you are going to get the growth anyway. You just won’t get to plan it and you won’t get the benefits of accepting it.”(CB)

The neighborhood planning process has lost an important capability, the connection to the Capital Improvement Project list.” That used to happen before we had neighborhood planning. Each neighborhood suggested their needs to enter them into the system. Then all of them were put into the book. Obviously we couldn’t finance them all. At least they were there in the catalog. And then when you are looking at the CIP budget at the next CIP election then you could look at everything that had been asked for. Each time you did that you could reevaluate priorities or changes. That is not happening anymore.”(JG)

## Concluding Statements

“One thing that’s a real problem with doing neighborhood planning – physically and emotionally, it is the toughest work that goes on in planning. Typically, these jobs attract the

youngest planners. They are just excited and think it's going to be just like it was in graduate school. Yet these are the people with the fewest coping skills (and the least experience)"(CB)

Many good things were hoped to happen. "So all those things didn't happen. I think by evolution they will happen because there are still enough people who remember the old vision. But some neighborhoods will not have that or they won't have it forever. Those neighborhoods with the initiative for planning give me hope for the future of neighborhood planning."(JG)

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Both Goodman and Barrett were interviewed February 9, 2006. Their histories were researched at the Austin History Center.