

**Review of the Neighborhood Planning Process  
in Old West Austin,  
As Told by Selected Participants**

**CRP 381 Participatory Methods in Community Planning**

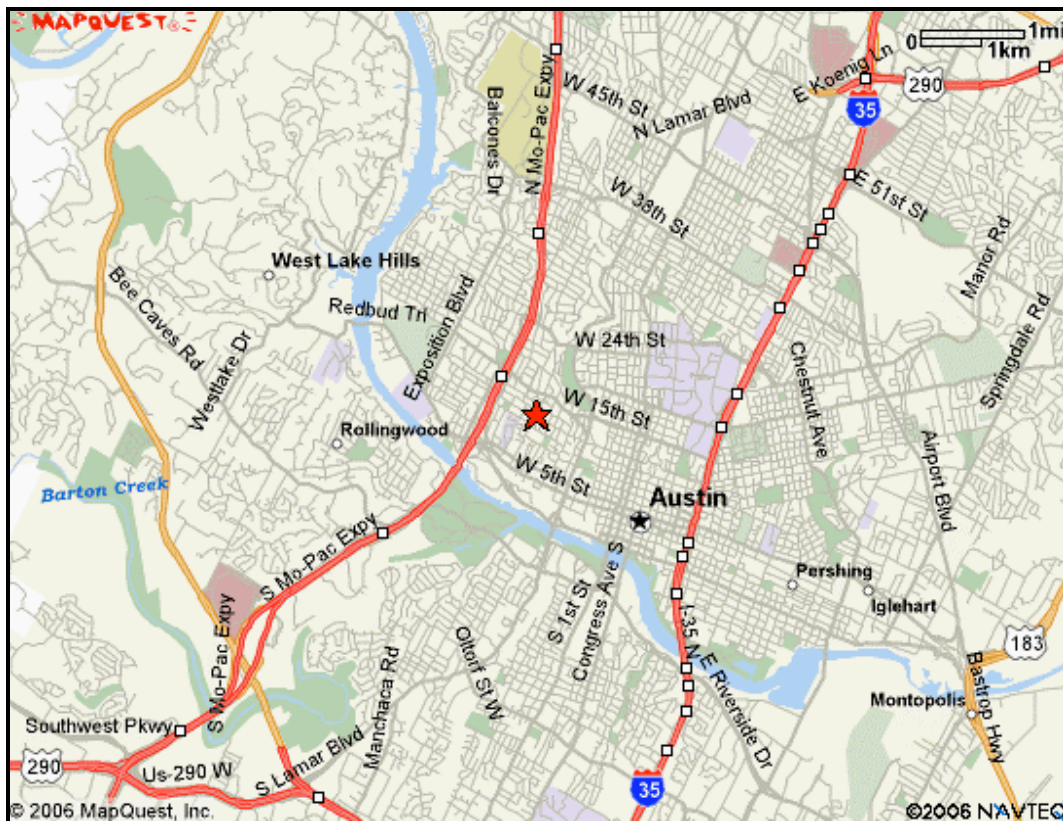
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## Introduction

As Austin grows, citywide issues such as affordable housing and traffic become more critical. These issues are particularly intense for the mature and historic Old West Austin (OWA) neighborhood. Its proximity to downtown and to the MoPac Expressway (see Figure 1) has meant higher volumes of traffic throughout the neighborhood. The desirability of the neighborhood also has increased. With rising property values and taxes, it is becoming more difficult for homeowners to stay in this sought-after neighborhood, especially when many of the homes are aging and in need of major repairs. Because of these pressures, residents recognized that something needed to be done to preserve the character of their neighborhood.

**Figure 1: Location Map**



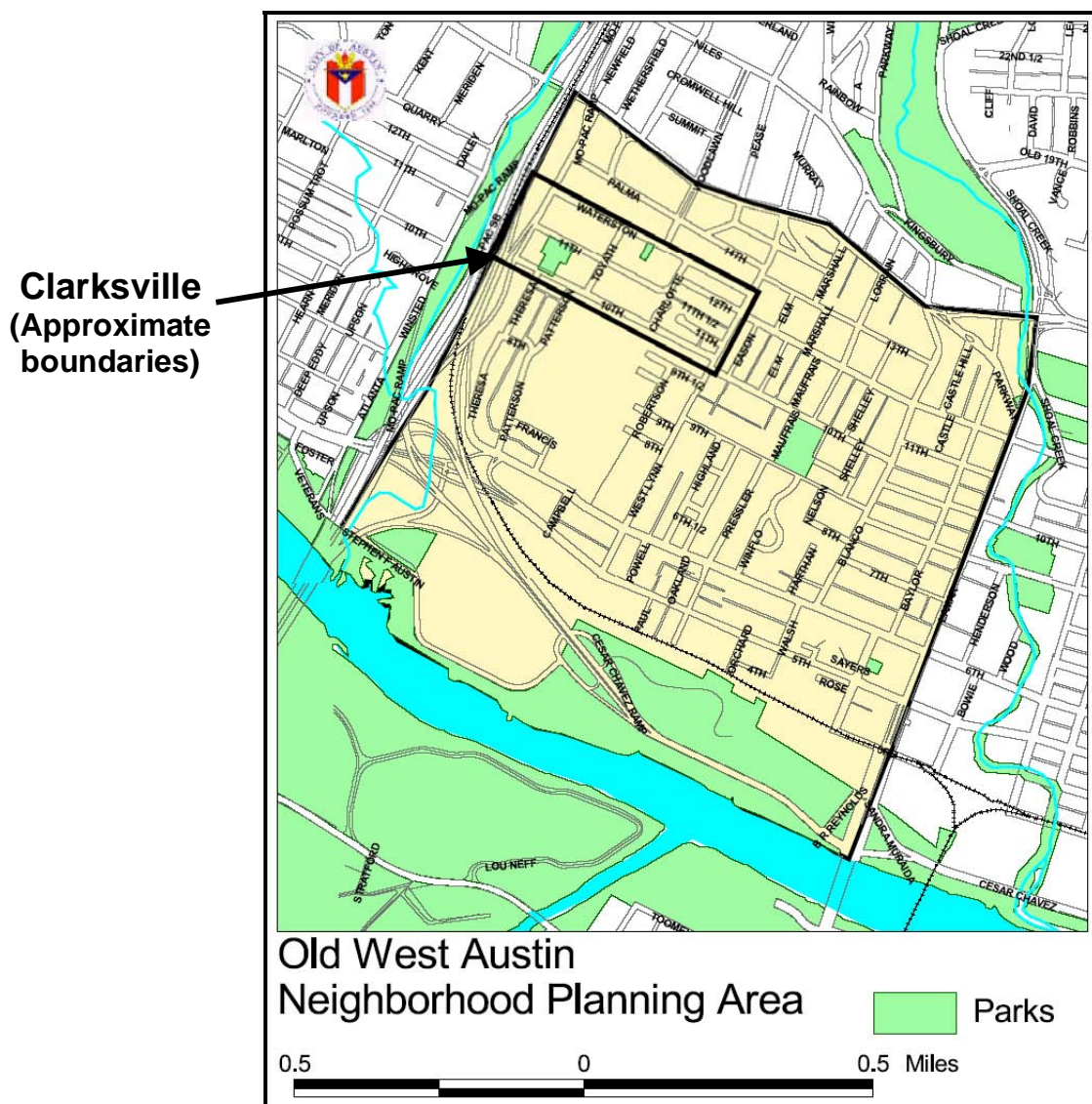
This paper summarizes the story of the neighborhood planning process in OWA as it was told by six individuals who participated in the creation and/or implementation of the plan. Two City of Austin neighborhood planners (one on the plan development side and one on the plan implementation side); the planning team chair and a homeowner in the neighborhood from the Old West Austin Neighborhood Association (OWANA); a leader of the first implementation team and a homeowner in the neighborhood from Clarksville Community Development Corporation (CCDC); a small business owner and neighborhood homeowner; and a large business owner each had their own experiences and perspectives to offer. It should be noted that they did not all interact with each other during the process since they were not all involved at the same time. Their stories are an important reflection on the design, process, and implementation of a neighborhood planning process. Although planning varies from one neighborhood to another, there are common concerns from stakeholders, as well as improvements, which could be made to the general neighborhood planning process.

### **Beginning of the Old West Austin Neighborhood Planning Process**

Originally, the neighborhood planning process in Austin was initiated by neighborhoods through an application process. OWANA initiated this process and submitted an extensive application to the City. The association had a newsletter and other forms of communication in place. They also gathered a list of stakeholder representatives including business owners and single-family homeowners to serve on the Neighborhood Planning Team (NPT). Its strongly organized structure was one of the main reasons that the City of Austin chose OWA as a neighborhood planning area.

In May of 1999, the City of Austin selected the area between Town Lake, North Lamar Boulevard, Enfield Road and Loop 1/MoPac (the same boundaries as OWANA) to go through the process of developing a neighborhood plan. The area, otherwise known as OWA, encompasses another association called the Clarksville Community Development Corporation (CCDC). The boundaries of Clarksville are West Lynn Street on the east side, MoPac on the west, West 10th Street on the south and Waterston on the north. See the map of OWA below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: OWA Neighborhood Map



According to the plan, “The neighborhood signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the City of Austin on June 14, 1999 to begin the planning process.” One City neighborhood planner thought that having a memorandum between neighborhoods and the City describing how the plans will be implemented established clearer expectations for those involved.

The structure of neighborhood planning in Austin has changed since the OWA plan was done. For example, at this stage in the neighborhood planning process, the City was focusing on “developing action items, selecting from the list of Smart Growth Infill Options, making recommendations about future land uses, and making zoning recommendations,” stated one City planner. He also said, “While it was anticipated that there would be subsequent zoning changes to implement the neighborhood plans’ land use recommendations, these rezonings did not proceed in tandem with the plan adoption process.” Also, according to a City planner, the City had limited resources, both staff and funding. This lack of resources was part of the reason why the application process was first used. The City relied on neighborhoods to organize themselves and begin the planning process.

With outreach conducted by the association, the City held an initial meeting with the stakeholders (invited by the NPT) to develop a list of goals and objectives. After getting a sense of the issues over the course of two to three meetings, the City helped the stakeholders create a survey based on information still needed. The development of the survey had its challenges, as described by a City planner, “One thing we learned about doing surveys is that it could take a significant amount of time (2-3 meetings) to develop a survey that everyone could agree on. We (the City) had to make some concessions that we did not feel strongly about. We ended up feeling like that time devoted to develop the survey was not worth the information received.”

The experience in OWA, as well as other neighborhoods, led the City to use a more standardized survey in future neighborhood planning areas.

Utilizing information from the Travis County Appraisal District and the Austin Energy utility records, the City planners mailed the survey (in English only) to every business, resident, and property owner. As part of the survey mail-out, an explanation of the neighborhood planning purpose and information about zoning was included. Besides neighborhood association newsletters, this letter might have been the first notification that some people received. Over 400 responses were returned, many of which were text heavy. Neighborhood stakeholders and City staff spent numerous hours on survey analysis, as illustrated by the City planner, “we had to tabulate everything manually with the customized neighborhood surveys.” On the positive side, the survey brought more people into the process. At a minimum, many gave their email addresses and stayed informed about the plan progression.

An interesting point raised by the City planner in charge of the OWA neighborhood was that even though many requests for a particular improvement were suggested in the survey, it didn't necessarily mean that the residents near that proposed improvement were in agreement with the change. For example, many survey respondents requested a sidewalk on West 9<sup>th</sup> Street. As it turned out, these requests were from parents using West 9<sup>th</sup> Street to walk their children to Mathews Elementary School and not from the residents on the street, some of which were opposed to the sidewalk in front of their homes.

## **Representation and Formation of the Neighborhood Planning Team**

Representation is a critical issue when developing a neighborhood plan, and OWA was no different. Some people joined the neighborhood planning team (NPT) as a result of the survey, but primarily, the NPT was comprised of OWANA residents. According to the planning chair, when the impact a plan can make on a neighborhood is unknown, people may think that it is going to be another study that sits on the shelf. These types of sentiment had to be overcome during the planning process.

Another group, business owners, sees these kinds of processes as time consuming, as illustrated by one business owner in the area, “It’s hard to commit to a seemingly endless string of meetings where very little gets accomplished.” Devoting time and energy to something that may result in little if any change is difficult to do, especially for business owners whose time is money. One business owner also indicated that if not included, business owners will admittedly go around the neighborhood directly to the City Council to express concerns; then no one is happy. Nonetheless, a large business owner in the neighborhood thought that businesses were well represented by the NPT. Still another business owner felt that businesses did not participate enough in the planning process itself.

One stakeholder group, tenants, seemed to be represented most by owners of rental property instead of the renters themselves. This type of representation was not by design. Efforts were made to include this group, but some tenants who were asked did not have time to devote to the process. Some of the interviewees remembered renters who participated at meetings, but their

names were not known. Finally, one City planner pointed out that despite efforts, non-resident property owners were not well represented.

### **Creation of the Plan**

The planning team chair was elected before the planning process began. As with most team structures, additional leadership emerged after a few neighborhood meetings. Subcommittees were formed to handle different sections of the plan. These subcommittees focused on four main topics: land-use/zoning, transportation, parks/green space, and historic preservation. Fortunately in OWA, leaders of these sub-groups had good experience in their particular topic. For example, two former Planning Commission members lived in the neighborhood and understood issues concerning land use and zoning. When conflicts arose, the NPT chair spent time and energy ensuring that the various interests understood the goals and objectives of other groups. According to one City planner, the chair in OWA was someone who stood out as being a partner in the development of the plan, instead of someone who had “their own agenda.” He brought together conflicting parties. With varying education levels, interests and backgrounds, setting goals for the neighborhood “is not an easy job and I thought Mark did as good as anyone could do,” said one of the business owners involved in the process. She went on to say that with people focusing on their areas of interest, they might become at odds with others having different points of view. “So I thought he (Mark) did just a grand job navigating all of that,” she said. The City planner indicated that not all neighborhoods are so lucky to find someone like the OWA NPT chair.



Unfortunately, getting people from all parts of the neighborhood involved in the planning process was not easy. One leader of the CCDC expressed her concerns about the lack of representation during the creation of the OWA neighborhood plan. According to the planning team chair, two representatives of Clarksville were asked to become involved with the planning process, but they declined. The City planner who helped create the OWA plan confirmed this information, stating that a representative of CCDC told them that they were “consumed with managing a controversial change in the CCDC Board’s leadership and did not have additional time to attend the neighborhood planning meetings.” He continued by saying that another Clarksville resident became involved to some extent, but “he was not what you would call your typical longtime Clarksville resident.” Additionally, he commented, “Clarksville representatives did attend the neighborhood-wide workshop that took place prior to the Planning Commission hearing on the plan.”

According to the NPT chair, the initial group of stakeholders dwindled to just a few toward the end of the plan development process. Door to door requests for participation were made by leaders in the process, and ultimately the ones who took time to work on the plan did the best they could to consult all stakeholders. They recognized the importance of having all interests taken into account for the final product’s credibility. Unfortunately, the City lost the records from the neighborhood planning meetings during a move, and therefore, no data is available on the exact participation numbers. However, the NPT chair was able to provide some data from memory regarding the persons listed in the neighborhood plan as contributors. Table 1 reflects the stakeholder group of those who participated on some level in the plan development.

**Table 1: Neighborhood Planning Participants Composition**

<b>Stakeholder Interest</b>	<b>Number of Persons Representing Stakeholder Group</b>
Resident/Homeowner	19
Business Owner/ Business Manager	5
Renter	3
Neighborhood Association	5
Non-resident property owner	1
Advisory role	4

Through the process, it became clear, according to the planning team chair, that the majority of the neighborhood was most interested in land use and zoning issues. Some of the interior transportation matters were being studied by the Department of Public Works and Transportation as part of the Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program. Although not connected, the two City program processes overlapped as far as timing. It is possible that the people most interested in interior transportation issues were devoting their time to working with that City department.

Issues pertaining to the park on West 10<sup>th</sup> Street also surfaced. Some tenants emerged for this discussion of whether to create a dog park where dogs could run free or to make all dogs remain on leashes. Residents became emotional. “That was a very polarizing experience,” said the leader of the NPT when speaking of the park issue. The resulting action item in the plan was not supported by the City’s Parks and Recreation Department and ended up being watered down by the authors of the plan to the point where neither side was particularly pleased, although “this

controversy was largely diffused by the NPT prior to the plan’s adoption,” according to a City planner.

### Adoption of the Plan

Once the plan was finished, it was mailed to every business, resident, and property owner for a vote. The ballot included four voting options: I support, I support with conditions (comments could be made), Overall I don’t support, or I don’t support. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the plan. See Table 2 for details about the ballot results. Approximately ninety percent of the ballots received supported the plan either with or without changes. The return rate was about 10 percent of all ballots sent out.

**Table 2: OWA Neighborhood Plan May 24, 2000 Ballot Results**

<b>Residential</b>	<b>Received</b>	<b>Percent</b>	
I support	177	61%	
Overall, I support	100	35%	
Overall, I Don’t Support	9	3%	
I Don’t Support	3	1%	

<b>Property Owners/ Non-Residential:</b>			
I support	48	55%	
Overall, I support	31	35%	
Overall, I Don’t Support	4	5%	
I Don’t Support	5	6%	

<b>Total</b>	<b>Received</b>	<b>Distributed</b>	<b>% Received</b>
Residential	289	2484	11%
Non-residential*	88	868	10%

\*Property owners who do not live in the neighborhood and business owners.

Source: OWA Neighborhood Plan, June 2000

There were certainly naysayers who surfaced when the plan was distributed for a vote. As one highly involved business owner in OWA exclaimed, “You send out these notices...and you think

that you did a good job, but when the final plan was put forth, a bunch of people came out of the woodwork just complaining about it.”

Concurrent to the balloting process, City departments were asked to review the finished product and provide comments. When disagreements between the NPT and the City departments were revealed, the team decided to keep their recommendations in the plan and put a statement about the lack of City support in parentheses. They were concerned that if the action items were removed, the knowledge of the desire to implement such a measure would “evaporate.” With the information gained from voters and from City departments, the plan was modified to some extent. The plan was passed directly on to City Council and was approved in June of 2000.

### **Responses to the Planning Process**

Some of the persons interviewed were pleased with the neighborhood planning process in OWA and spoke of the positive results it achieved. For example, it got neighbors, businesses and City staff at the same table to reach a desired outcome. They also better knew and understood one another after this process was completed. One small business owner and OWA resident made this sentiment clear by saying, “then all of a sudden you’re empowered because you know people.”

However, the neighborhood response to the adoption of the plan was not all positive. There were issues related to the process. The issues primarily centered on representation during plan development, the length of time the process required, and the information the participants were provided when the plan was written.

Firstly, with representation in mind, a resident of and business owner in OWA reflected the overarching setback with neighborhood planning in OWA when she said, “outreach is the key.” With a more representative contact team in place early, the neighborhood planning process itself could have brought more people to the table. For example, the City and neighborhood contact team recognized the importance of reaching people in Clarksville through the Sweet Home Baptist Church, whereas the NPT might have appeared to some to have neglected this asset. In fact, a City planner recalls “standing inside the church talking with the then-chair of the CCDC Board about trying to get Clarksville involved.” A business owner in OWA stated that “engaging more people or informing them earlier” would lessen the prospect of conflict during the implementation stage of the planning process.

In addition, “...there were plenty of people on the residential side that were upset with the residential representation of the plans that had been made,” stated one business owner. This was exacerbated by the history of the residents who may or may not welcome changes to the neighborhood. One local business owner and resident indicated that the neighborhood was “...worried about the height, density, and amount of retail.” She personally believed that the zoning map proposal to allow more height along West Sixth Street, so long as the ground level stayed retail, was a great model. In the end, she said, “I don’t think people realized the influence the neighborhood plan would have on later development.”

Secondly, concerning the length of the process, those interviewed expressed varying opinions. One local business owner pointed out that “a year process is a long time,” while another thought that in order to have business owners involved, “a year long process of getting information out”

is needed to complete the business list, residential list and apartment dwellers list then another year to complete the plan development. A City planner interviewed said that one year is the goal for neighborhood plan development, but “every time we hear that it really ends up being more like a year and a half.” Following the vote from the neighborhood, plans have to be reviewed by the Planning Commission and City Council which can take up to six months. As seen on the timeline in Figure 3, the neighborhood was selected in October of 1998, the proposed plan was sent to the neighborhood for a vote in May 2000, and the final plan was approved by the City Council in June 2000. Therefore, for plan development and adoption, the length of time for OWA was not too distant from ideal as expressed by most of those interviewed.

Lastly, the type of information and lack of information provided to the neighborhood is an issue raised by the leader of the planning team. An OWA resident said, “You can’t do neighborhood planning in a vacuum” and further, “I wish we could define better on an Austin-wide basis the different interests between development and neighborhoods to keep their neighborhoods just the way they are and the City which is right in between.” These external and internal forces on the City of Austin needed to be revealed so everyone could understand how their neighborhood plans reflect the overall goals of the City for the neighborhood. For example, the City may have certain goals about development along corridors. “They [residents] may not agree with [these goals], but they’d understand the context they are operating in,” said the planning team chair. As such, it is important to consider that there are many different stakeholders involved, as well as many different City departments. Conducting the neighborhood planning process without these considerations creates difficulties experienced by a broad spectrum of the City.