

AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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This report looks at the Neighborhood Planning Process in Austin from the perspectives and recollections of some key individuals. Each person's experience presents a different perspective on the Planning Process. A person's own words are often the best form of communication. There is the risk that comments taken out of context can change a connotation, but the fundamental loyalty of these citizens to their hometown Austin is unquestionable.

Jeff Jack has been active in Austin Neighborhood Planning for 20 years. He has been a Neighborhood Association President, an Austin Neighborhood Council leader and an aide to a City Council member. His perspective is especially instructive about the Past.

Tim Mahoney is an attorney, a neighborhood leader and a political activist. He is currently actively involved in the Neighborhood Planning Process. His interest is demonstrated by his participation in our seminar discussions. His comments are insightful for the Present.

Greg Guernsey is the newly appointed Director of the Neighborhood Planning and Zoning Department for the City of Austin. He shows us the opportunity and promise of new leadership in the Future.

THE PAST: Jeff Jack

Personal Involvement.

“Currently I am president of the Zilker Neighborhood Association and Vice-President of the Austin Neighborhood Council. But my involvement with Neighborhood Planning in Austin goes back to 1996.”

Summary Statement about the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “The Neighborhood Planning Process had a great deal of potential. However, it was fraught with a lot of preconceived notions. Yet, the guidelines set out in the Neighborhood Planning area were fairly successful. Our position was very simple. Neighborhood Planning should be primarily a tool for developing “Community”. The result of that development of “Community” should be to lessen the strife between various interest groups, to bringing them all

to the same table, and to have a thorough vetting of people's interest in coming up with a plan for the neighborhood that very clearly states what is appropriate and not appropriate (for the neighborhood).”

Requirements for Success in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- ““With regard to Neighborhood Plan, there were two fundamental things which needed to be done so that neighborhoods in the planning process would succeed.

One of them is access to current data, “What is the zoning? What is the utility infrastructure utilization? What do we have to start with? What is the possible carrying capacity of the infrastructure? What is the development potential of the existing zoning?” Also needed are all sorts of demographic information about family distribution, family composition, income levels, etc. There was a whole long list, that we provided to the city staff, that should be given to the neighborhood at the start of the Neighborhood Planning Process.””

Limitations of the Process.

- “Yet very quickly the process began to change. The ad hoc committee did their work, so they went away. City staff began to take this on. The original idea was that the process would be community driven with staff assistance. What happened over several years is that it is now staff driven with some community input. This is a very different process.”

- “We have a limited amount of staff because that is where the city's priorities. We have more people working in economic development and redevelopment services than we have in neighborhood planning.”

- “As the process evolved, now we have the situation where we have even fewer staff spending even less time. Through the entire process, things that we had learned to accept as significantly important in regard to making decisions about land use (capacity of infrastructure and environmental limits of land use) have not ever been involved in any decisions.”

Participant Politics: Residents.

- “Essentially we gave the message to those neighborhood activists, “Don't buy in to whatever the staff will try to push on you. You do what is best for you.””

- “This was more successful in some neighborhoods than others. In some neighborhoods you have great leadership. In others, you don’t have any at all. What staff did was to pick and choose which neighborhoods they would try to do plans with. Seriously, they would avoid some areas which had significant, well trained, disciplined leadership and chose neighborhoods which had great growth potential for infill. They avoided some irate neighborhoods.”

Participant Politics: Commercial Interests.

- “The business community did what the business community has always done – they expected to be treated special by walking in and lobbying City Council on all their issues. But our basic idea was that you had to come to the Neighborhood Planning Process table.”

- “RECA (Real Estate Council of Austin) has never said to an entrepreneur, “You’re project is in conflict with the Neighborhood Plan.” RECA has never said, “You shouldn’t do this.” RECA says, “Here is how to get around it.”

- “So (as a developer) I don’t want to be told there is not enough water capacity. I want THAT found out AFTER you give me the zoning. And staff says the data is too hard to provide to the citizens.”

- “So that’s probably the biggest failure of the business community – to not respect the Neighborhood Planning Process.”

Participant Politics: City Staff.

- “At first there was immediate opposition from city administration, “This is too tough. It takes too much of staff resources. Let’s not do it.”

So I asked a member of staff, “Can we do this?” “Oh sure,” he said.

After several months of hand-wringing and no action, we finally go the City Council to direct the city administration to produce the Zoning Report. This was the basis for the Neighborhood Planning that I thought should have been done years before. What’s interesting is that they did it for a couple of years; now they have basically stopped doing it.”

- “Staff has it. They can whip it out of the computer. But for a neighborhood to have it, it costs too much; it’s impossible to do. Why? Because they know you’ve got an area that is maxed out of capacity.”

- “The Dawson Neighborhood Plan had in it very generalized wording like “increase residential housing types,” very general. And the neighborhood was OK with that. Then city staff developed a zoning plan that was pushing very hard for densification.”
- “The staff has defined itself as a stake holder in the Neighborhood Planning Process. I challenged them that as a stakeholder, you have an agenda. They said staff doesn’t have an agenda. I replied that then they were not a stakeholder. You either are or you are not. You cannot play the game and claim you are a stakeholder and not put your cards on the table. But staff is doing what they’re supposed to be doing for city management.”

Future Land Use Maps.

- “The Future Land Use Map is a good example of a manipulative procedure for the outcome of a certain situation in the Bouldin Neighborhood. The neighborhood said very clearly that they wanted SF3 zoning in a certain area. All participants in the Neighborhood Planning Process allowed the FLUM map to say SF. Then a developer came in and bought a tract of land with running water to the side. He wanted to subdivide into SF4A. Staff agreed with the developer. But the Neighborhood Plan says SF3. Staff argued that the FLUM only says SF. Staff learned that they need to get the neighborhood to agree to a land use map that is very general. (Then they can interpret the specifics.)
- “If a FLUM doesn’t have sufficient detail, staff is free to talk about lots with only 5750 to 7000 square feet for one household, because the plan says residential. “

Successes in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “One of the things I did get accomplished was an inventory of what all the zoning is in the neighborhoods. When Council makes a decision about a piece of property, they can see that 20% of the land in a neighborhood is already zoned that way, “So why would we do this?” It’s called the Neighborhood Report.”
- “Then when I worked for Beverly, I went to public works and asked, “Can I get a map of our sewer lines?” He said, “Sure. We have it on GIS.” I asked for the remaining LUE’s (Living Unit Equivalents, a utility measurement) in our neighborhood. The reply was, “No problem. Here it is.””

Failures in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “Staff has chosen not to deal with the carrying capacity of our infrastructure, the carrying capacity of our region. It goes back to the simplistic view of our economic system that the free market is the best mechanism for making decisions, and that growth is important, therefore we must grow.”
- “So it goes back to the fundamental mismatch between the idea of building community for the people of tomorrow and establishing a value system that is independent of the business market. Or simply saying, “The market governs all, so get out of the way.” Isn’t this the reason we created our government – to balance the interests of the few against the needs of the many? This is why the Neighborhood Planning Process needs a total revamp, because for 8 years the mechanism of balance became the mechanism for facilitating business over the neighborhood opposition.”

The Need for Communication.

- “Well, there are a lot of people who believe we ought to densify the city. They’re not a majority; I would say they are a very vocal minority, but they are out there. It just happened that this coincided with staff’s interest in pushing some of the higher density planning forms into the Dawson neighborhood – the urban lot and the cottage lot.

So the neighborhood group that was working through the Neighborhood Planning Process adopted the plan – all of the housing options that would take the large lots in the neighborhood and subdivide them into small lots. The problem was that there wasn’t adequate communication between the small group of activists and the rest of the neighborhood. When the rest of the neighborhood found out about it, they went ballistic.”

- “It had a lot to do with communication. They were relying on the Neighborhood Associations to be the communication vehicle. Big Mistake! You have to make sure early on that you have sufficient money to send out the notices to make sure everyone gets notified.”

The Need for Education.

- LQ: “Then what about some municipal issues, like transportation, that really require a larger view? Some issues require the perspective of several neighborhoods.” JJ: “This requires that those issues be part of the initial process, part of the education process. City-wide issues should be part of the dialog mix. You can’t hold them out until the end and veto what everybody has done.

THE PRESENT: Tim Mahoney

Personal Involvement.

“I’m a populist and believe in working issues through a population.”

Summary Statement about the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “What I want is really very simple. That’s really to create a process so people can start looking at each other anew. Because the reason that neighborhood... A political debate presupposes that people see the world enough alike that they can disagree about it.”

Requirements for Success in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “So you have to create a process by which people can hear. And I say that two things need to come out of this. A transition process that is very short and that creates decentralized units, city-wide, that help build what might traditionally be looked at as mutually exclusive goals, predictability that enhances uniqueness and the opportunity for community building.”

Limitations of the Process.

- “...you need to have a Neighborhood Planning Cycle that’s no more than 6 months. Because you lose people.”

Participant Politics: Residents.

- “And the neighborhood people are afraid of the developers. And there may not be much of a basis in reality for the local power structure. You need to have a new structure that is set up and builds itself up in time. And there are going to be areas of town that won’t be as far advanced or mature as others.”

Participant Politics: Commercial Interests.

- “You need to be talking a language that developers understand. But they are so reactionary and resistant to change. And they think they have power. They sometimes make a lot of money...” “And so they’re just very afraid.”
- “You are sitting there trying to please a developer who has a very short economic interest and then is gone.”

Participant Politics: City Staff.

“In my neighborhood, the South River City Citizens, this is the largest geographic area neighborhood association in the city. And we divided up into 10 sectors, that really don’t have, they were just accidental in how they were put together. But they made no reference at all, to when they were doing the planning team, after the planning process, they said, “We’re just going to have 30 people that will be on this.” I said, “You ought to make sure you get some sort of spread throughout the 10 sector areas.” They consciously said no.”

- “The planning staff is in shock all the time because they must deal with the neighborhood folk and the developers. Everybody is yelling at them.”
- “The planners with the City had a huge conflict of interest in terms of their power paradigm. They have the goal to get more density, although it is not an articulated policy of the City Council, it is part of the planning process. They are going out there to produce more taxable property and this justifies the cost of new infrastructure. It’s their job to push the neighborhoods in that direction. The neighborhood people are resistant to that.”

Successes in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “Yes, one of the things that having decentralized power system, like sectors all over the city, is that it starts to create a different culture of decision making. It makes a lot of this, what has normally been back room deals, more public.”

“So it’s to what degree can this type of structuring be used to get people to take responsibility for their own future and present.”

Failures in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “The whole process needs to be integrated. When they started the bond package last year, the neighborhood activists, in spite of its being the City’s policy, said, “The Neighborhood Planning projects should go through the chain of command, be cataloged and be available for bond funding analysis. That just starts new every time, and there was never anyone who was responsible for doing that.

The Need for Education.

- “Did you know there was a whole Neighborhood Training Academy, that the City had for about 5 years until about 3 years ago?”

THE FUTURE: Greg Guernsey

Personal Involvement.

“I’m currently Director of Neighborhood Planning and Zoning. I took over this position January 1, 2006. And Alice Glasco actually left January 31, so technically we were serving a dual role. Before that I was Assistant Director, mainly over zoning functions and some of the administrative tasks. Prior to that, I was Division Manager for the Current Planning Section, which handles zoning, annexation, and historic districts. We worked closely with the neighborhood planners. Then we were reconstituted and merged together.

My responsibility was to implement zoning that would compliment the Neighborhood Plan, and I’ve have been working in that capacity for about nine years. Prior to that, I was a site planner in the Development Assistance Center as a Zoning Planner for 10 years before this, so I have been with the City of Austin for about 20 years.”

Summary Statement about the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “There are things I think are important that we’re getting out of the Neighborhood Planning Process. The number one thing is there is some vision for the neighborhood. Probably, the second is the zoning to implement that. “

Requirements for Success in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “I think one thing which has improved is that we try to get the rules for participation to be known out front, rather than try to create them at the end. That’s something we’ve done, and it’s very helpful to have.”

- “The bad thing about that is that the longer we wait on some of this process, you have new people come into the process at the very end. The process is not set up as well to take those last minute opinions on issues.”

Limitations of the Process.

- “The Neighborhood Planning Process burns planners out. It is unfortunate and for quite a while now, since Carol Barrett left, we have burned out the staff. Instead, we should nourish them and also provide employment opportunities within the City for advancement.”

Participant Politics: Residents.

- “I think Density is something we all have to realize is going to happen. What I have found in a lot of neighborhoods, if it is moderate and is not exaggerated in any one place it might be more palatable. This is certainly so if it’s done with a better design. A lot of what you hear about McMansions that it’s all right for someone to add a thousand square feet or even 1500 sq. ft to add more bedroom or even a small garage apartment, as long as you don’t have 6 students or 6 adults and 6 of their friends living in a giant house.”

- “It is more difficult to bring that to some neighborhoods. We want to introduce some town homes here. You’re treated as if you are bringing in the Plague.”

Participant Politics: Commercial Interests.

- “I think it’s important to make sure business people stay committed to the process. I think it’s always going to be more difficult because: 1.) It’s not their home. 2.) An individual business that owns their own property will participate more. 3.) If they lease the space and it’s a franchise, it’s more difficult to get their involvement. I don’t know if there is an easy way to address that other than to make the Neighborhood Planning Process open and inclusive at the beginning.”

- “The other one is that the land values go so high. You need to provide those alternative residence types to make it affordable for someone to live. That they can create a garage

apartment on back of their lot, or they can create a duplex and live in half of it. That offsets some of their living costs.”

- “I’m thankful we have a Real Estate Council of Austin out there because they give that input we would not have. But you need to get the people who actually live there. Some property owners are going to be in the neighborhood for a long time. They recognize that the businesses are going to change.”

- “The density issue is another example. People say, “There is an assumed density which has to go in every single neighborhood.” Well, maybe not. I think if you said Riverside has to absorb 1000 more apartment units, the neighborhood would go absolutely ballistic. If you went out to Oak Hill and said maybe you need some more apartment units, aside from the environmental issues out there, it may be appropriate to have more housing choices.”

Participant Politics: City Staff.

- “Density is an interesting issue. I’ve heard more about it in the last 2 months of being Director than anything else. I think the city has goals for affordable housing and is trying to make sure there’s an adequate supply. There is concern about gentrification.”

- “Concerning the density issue... we all know there are more people coming. It’s been happening and continues to happen with phenomenal growth in the city, but I don’t know if there is something in writing that the city staff must force density on any neighborhood. “

- “But I don’t think there is what has been described to me as a “hidden agenda” to force density. I think the City Council has taken positions to say they want more density downtown. On the other hand, they haven’t said “We adopt the Envision Central Texas vision and our policy statements on that will go forward.” They certainly discuss them all the time. They recognize what is going to happen. They don’t actually make them a policy.”

Future Land Use Maps.

- “Some of the Neighborhood Plans go very well because of the education of the neighborhood is up to speed. In others it takes a long time. You have so many competing interests. Maybe it’s because of the size of the neighborhood area and everyone wants their interests represented. Some neighborhoods don’t even want any zoning changes. They want to

fight each individual battle, which I think is crazy. You really want to look at the context, and get the Neighborhood Plan and Future Land Use Map adopted where people are comfortable with that.”

- “If you don’t have those people in the beginning, you’re never going to get them at the end. That’s where the education process comes in. At the beginning of the Neighborhood Planning Process is almost more important than the decision about the Future Land Use Map. If you lose people in the beginning, you don’t have the proper audience that’s giving you the proper input you need to create the Future Land Use Map. So we have to capture them up front.”

Successes in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “Even if you know what the capacity is, there are actions which have been taken in the past by commissions and the City Council. Even though a road may be operating at a given level of service “F”, or barely an “E”, we’re going to approve density and improvements at this location, for example, 6th and Lamar. Old West Austin Neighborhood always points out we have horrendous traffic congestion. Granted, we do. But the city council has consistently approved up zoning improvements, and projects that get built in the area. It is the downtown.”

Failures in the Neighborhood Planning Process.

- “I’ve heard horror stories from other cities. One thing Austin has is a Public Information Office as a community registry for neighborhoods to register with the City of Austin. We had a map drawn to show the area claimed by Neighborhood Associations. There were places in Austin which were claimed by multiple neighborhoods. One location had 16 Neighborhood Associations claiming responsibility. It was a huge map, and as you went from yellow to orange to red, you could see where neighborhoods overlapped in territory. You cannot have 16 entities all representing the same interest.”

- “No, you can’t prohibit every group home from your neighborhood. There are certain court decisions made by the United States Supreme Court that “No, you have to allow them just like any other single family housing”. I have a group home that is five doors away from me on my street. My neighborhood is going absolutely ballistic. I’ve explained to my children; my

wife understands this. These patients are drug and alcohol offenders who have to live somewhere. We have to make this accommodation. “

- “You also have the legislature. The last 4 sessions they have been “Taking” bills. Whether we shall down zone a neighborhood from SF3 to SF2 or down zone multifamily properties that may be used for a SF. There may be a great debate in the next couple of months in the next full session on taking bills. It may be financially impossible for city staff to be able to make recommendations to down zone some properties. “

The Need for Communication.

- “There was at one time where neighborhoods had some ability to implement projects that they wanted, either more sidewalks or park improvements. I think that’s very good when you look at the broad picture of implementing capitol improvements. I think different departments, Public Works, the Street and Bridge Division and the Parks departments need to look at the Neighborhood Plans as a guide for what may happen in those particular neighborhoods. I think Neighborhood Plans are a good tool to use for that.”

- “I am going to try to use our website to have more FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about the Neighborhood Planning Process and to provide more training and even more general training about a neighborhood. I think that will help up front, especially about zoning. “

The Need for Education.

- “I guess the biggest thing I have about the Neighborhood Planning Process, and one of the things I am going to try to do as a director, is to provide more education. We have an Office of Neighborhood Services that was merged with our department in the beginning. There was a short course for citizens to do a kind of one on one and explained the Neighborhood Plan. -

“People understand the idea of having a vision of what their neighborhood wants to look like. Then zoning comes along and rubber hits the road. You really start talking about uses and what you can and can’t do. “

- “I think it would help to have some training up front to explain: there are types of zoning districts, there are types of activities preferred and these things are not permitted. You cannot get rid of every adult oriented business in the city and forever ban them from my neighborhood.

There has to be an accommodation that’s made.”

- "I think trying to be more inclusive and to have the education up front. Those are things that are important and help everyone understand the process and each other. Even if you disagree, at least you are talking the same language and you are speaking from the same base. If we don't have that, it's very difficult to carry on a conversation."