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## **Ten Years of Neighborhood Planning in Austin**

### **Introduction**

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Good morning! The Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning at the University of Texas would like to welcome you to today's workshop. We would like to thank you for volunteering your Saturday morning to participate in this very important workshop. The students in my Participatory Planning course were given the assignment to review the ten year history of neighborhood planning in Austin and then design and facilitate this multi-stakeholder workshop on next steps. I'd like to acknowledge their efforts now (STAND). Some of you may recognize them. They have interviewed 42 participants in neighborhood planning, including residents, business owners, neighborhood planners (current and former) and public officials. If you have been interviewed by them please stand so we can honor you for the time you generously gave them. (STAND)

We have been honored to have the opportunity to delve deeply into neighborhood planning in Austin and to work with the 13 member convening committee for this workshop. The students have worked hard on this project and we hope that our findings can help further the development of the neighborhood planning process in Austin. We want to recognize and thank everyone who has given their time and talent to the neighborhood planning process during the past 10 years. We believe that Austin is a better city because of the concern of its citizens to be involved in the development of their neighborhoods and their city.

### **Austin's Neighborhood Planning in Perspective**

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This morning, we would like to present some of the findings from our research into the past ten years of neighborhood planning in Austin. Our research followed two tracks: one was an effort to understand the process from the various points of view of the participants themselves. We chose 5 neighborhoods: East Cesar Chavez, Old West Austin, Upper Boggy Creek, the Central Austin Combined, and the East Riverside – Oltorf Combined Neighborhoods. We also had students working on a second track: white papers that researched particular neighborhood planning issues, gathered data for triangulating the narrative stories, and put the Austin experience in a national perspective comparing it to other cities. We have posted these neighborhood stories and selected

white papers on a public website, where we will also post today's workshop results and evaluation.

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To understand the current practice of neighborhood planning in Austin, we believe that it is helpful recognize its historic roots. Do you know why 1928 is often cited as the year of the first neighborhood plan for Austin? The 1928 City Plan for Austin, passed by City Council, put forth the use of racial segregation to create particular districts or neighborhoods. Thirty years later came the Austin Plan of 1958, where residents had their first opportunity to provide input during the approval process. Close behind was the *Austin Development Plan* of 1961—the first to discuss neighborhood planning in terms of land use and density in new neighborhoods. Then came the *Austin Tomorrow Plan of 1979*, drafted with the help of a citizens' Goals Assembly made up of carefully selected community representatives who drew in as much public participation as possible. (STAND)

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This brings us to the current timeline of the neighborhood planning process that began in 1995 with the *Citizen's Planning Committee Report* prepared for the City Council. In this report, it was recommended that "community plans" be established through community participation to sustain a vibrant livable city. The neighborhood process was formally begun in 1997 with the final report of the Citizens' Planning and Implementation Committee, entitled *The Challenge for Austin's Future*. After devising a centralized and updated registry for neighborhood associations in Austin, pilot programs were devised to initiate neighborhood planning in a few select locations. The first three neighborhoods chosen to move forward in the process were East Cesar Chavez and Chestnut, both in East Austin, and Dawson in South Austin. (STAND) Since that beginning the City of Austin has approved 23 neighborhood plans with 7 more currently under review.

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The interviews and white papers demonstrate the painstaking effort by dedicated residents, business owners, and City staff that has produced 30 plans. The neighborhood planning stories show some important lessons learned. The literature review points to Austin being among the early adopters to carry out neighborhood planning in a systematic and continuous way, having patterned its approach on the Portland model of the early '90s.

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But the research also identifies a pattern that has emerged in Austin's neighborhood planning that is holding it back and dissipating its efforts: neighborhood planning is

wearing down both citizen participants and City staff, and creating mistrust between them.

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We have identified two fundamental issues that underlie this pattern: lack of alignment around the purpose of neighborhood planning, and lack of clarity about the relationship between the City and the neighborhoods—i.e. the roles each should play. These two issues, purpose and roles, are fundamental issues that must be addressed for any future changes to be effective.

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### **Aligning around Purpose**

Most of the stakeholders we interviewed in Austin began with high hopes for neighborhood planning. Many hoped that it would empower the neighborhoods to become pro-active in maintaining and enhancing their quality of life. Some saw it as an opportunity for renewed civic engagement: a chance to develop a shared vision of the future of their community and galvanize residents to work towards it. Some saw it as a means to rigorously investigate possible futures, address emerging trends, select desired scenarios, and develop appropriate action strategies in a coordinated fashion. Others saw neighborhood planning as a way to let the City know their needs and priorities and get resources. Many participants in the early rounds are indeed quite satisfied that their purpose has been fulfilled.

Yet over time as people went through the neighborhood planning process their sense of the real purpose of neighborhood planning shifted: Some began to view the process as a time-consuming formality with little or no clout. Many began to see it as a means to implement the City's agenda or to defend the neighborhoods from the City's agenda. Creating or renewing a shared vision about the purpose of neighborhood planning and the role it can play in our city and our neighborhoods is critical.

The lack of clarity and agreement around purpose creates frustration, unmet expectations, confrontation, and attrition among various stakeholders in the planning process. The main purpose for neighborhood planning identified by the City in the May 1997 resolution was to organize neighborhoods and engage them in the city processes that affect them – improvements, policy, service delivery, and development. One major point of contention in neighborhood planning in Austin has been over land use. According to City ordinance, the purpose of the land use component of the plan: “is to allow infill development by implementing a neighborhood plan that has been adopted by the council as an amendment to the comprehensive plan.” The interest of the City in infill development and adding density to central Austin is a major point of conflict for the neighborhood planning process.

Clarity about, and alignment around, the purpose of neighborhood planning would help address many issues and stumbling blocks that Austin has encountered over 10 years of neighborhood planning. It would also help clarify roles and responsibilities for the various stakeholders.

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### **Clarifying Roles and Relationships**

Closely related to the issue of purpose is the question of relationships. The questioning of the type of relationship between the city and the neighborhoods was a common theme throughout our research. Probably the key relationship that needs better definition is the relationship between the neighborhoods and the City. On the City's website, the City/public relationship in the neighborhood planning process is described as follows: "Working together with Neighborhood Planning staff, stakeholders establish a clear vision of their priorities, needs and guide for future development." Even with this stated relationship, it was repeatedly voiced that the roles of the neighborhood and city planning staff must be better defined.

Because there is a lot at stake, the neighborhood planning process is frequently a crucible for contention and disagreement as properties, investments, livelihoods, and quality of life are directly affected. Simultaneously, City staff must maintain a citywide perspective in order for the neighborhood plans to add up to a comprehensive plan for the city. Such tensions are useful and the resulting conflict creative when the container or crucible for disagreement is strong, safe, and trusted. Such is not the case in the opinion of most of the people we interviewed. A growing sense of mistrust was a common theme we heard, particularly with respect to the City and the neighborhoods.

Many of our interviewees expressed strong grievances over how the City handles the neighborhood planning process, ranging from disorganization and miscommunication to incompetence and outright betrayal. In turn, some of the City staff expressed frustration at how their hands were tied in dealing with the neighborhoods: insufficient time and resources, incomplete information, or changing directives. Some also expressed dismay at the disrespectful treatment given them by neighborhood planning participants. The high turnover rate and number of vacancies attest to the difficulty of the job. Both citizens and staff are being worn down by a process that has the potential to be energizing and engaging.

Clarification and agreement on the desired relationship between the City and the neighborhoods is required to establish a solid working relationship and build trust so that efforts can be aligned around a shared sense of purpose rather than directed at each other.

There are many other relationships involved in neighborhood planning that would benefit from clarification. These include the relationships between different neighborhood

associations in the same planning area; between businesses and residents; owners and renters; neighborhood planning teams and other neighborhood organizations and stakeholders; and neighborhood planning teams and developers. Transparency and fluidity in these relationships are important for maintaining trust and accountability in the neighborhood planning process.

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### **Choice Points**

Once a shared sense of purpose in neighborhood planning is achieved and well defined roles agreed upon for achieving that purpose, a number of strategic choice points can be addressed. These choice points relate to the issues that have come up numerous times—at the December Planning Commissioners’ Retreat, at the January Neighborhood Planning Teams workshop, and in our interviews: the scope and structure of the neighborhood planning process, outreach and representation, implementation and enforcement, and the functioning of neighborhood planning or contact teams.

This simplified flow chart of the current neighborhood planning process in Austin, a copy of which is at each of your tables in the break-out rooms, can help identify key choice points. You will be asked to think through which changes would produce the desired results, which would have the greatest impact. You will be asked to think strategically about the future of neighborhood planning in Austin and together to choose the most important action steps for implementing those changes. Here are just a few choices you may want to consider

#### *Choosing neighborhood planning areas and boundaries*

- How large should planning areas be? As Austin has aimed to cover more ground the size of the planning areas has increased.
- Where should neighborhood planning be focused? Some cities emphasize the growing edges, others the older central areas in need of revitalization, and still others have neighborhood planning processes tailored to the needs of each type of area.
- Should neighborhoods apply or be chosen by the City for neighborhood planning? As Austin did initially, many cities ask neighborhoods to apply for the neighborhood planning process.

#### *Outreach*

- What is the role of the City and what is the role of the neighborhood associations in promoting broad and representative participation in neighborhood planning?

*Neighborhood Planning Process*

- What should the scope of neighborhood planning be? In some cities it includes economic development, community health, and social service provision in addition to land use, urban design, housing, and transportation. Should zoning be included?
- How is consensus built, decisions made, and disputes resolved? What happens when newcomers come in at the end of the process? What happens when there are competing plans?
- How long should the neighborhood planning process take? How many public meetings should be involved? How many meetings with the local leadership groups? This has become an issue because of the decline in attendance that occurs during such an extended process. The average time nationally is about one year. Currently in Austin a neighborhood plan takes on average two years from start to finish.

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*Implementation and Enforcement*

- Who is responsible?
- When should neighborhood planning teams (or contact teams) be selected and how should they be governed?
- Where do the resources for implementation come from?
- How is implementation evaluated?
- How can city departments be brought on board to coordinate with plan recommendations for improvements and services?

As in other cities, enforcement is the major hurdle in neighborhood planning. In most cases the plan does not hold the force of law—it is a statement of intent. The most successful examples have a process for ongoing dialogue with the departments about their plans and how they interface with neighborhood priorities. The simple awareness stemming from these dialogues creates a greater attention to neighborhood plans and priorities even without the plans being legally enforceable.

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**Moving Forward**

Now, we come to today. How do we deal with a pattern of mistrust between the City and the neighborhoods that is wearing the process thin? There are three choices for resolving such a pattern:

- 1) Regulate the process through ordinances and rules;

- 2) Privatize the process by allowing neighborhoods to hire their own neighborhood planners and consultants; or
- 3) Collaborate among the stakeholders to deal with the tough choices facing the neighborhoods and the city as a whole as we look to the future.

We want to use today's efforts to begin to collaborate and figure out our next steps.

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### **Choices That Other Cities Have Made**

Before beginning the workshop, we want to give you some ideas about the different choices that have been made by other communities in their efforts towards neighborhood planning. We hope that these vignettes spark your thinking about the next steps for the neighborhood planning process in Austin.

*Outreach and implementation:* In the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods process in Rochester, NY, each planning area or sector forms a representative committee of local stakeholders that is provided with both a trained professional facilitator and a city planner. The sector committees are responsible for spearheading broad-based action planning and asset mapping. For implementation the sector committees use an electronic reporting system and database known as NeighborLink to track the results of each sector plan and coordinate with city departments.

*Education:* Some cities have neighborhood institutes or neighborhood academies that provide education and training on such topics as planning skills, conflict mediation, and leadership training. The City of New London Neighborhood Academy is an ongoing series of weekly classes offered through the Department of Neighborhood Preservation, under the umbrella of the Office of Development and Planning. New London's program addresses a different topic each week, and is described as "an educational partnership that gives New Londoners insight into the city's history, governmental processes and the inner workings of its neighborhoods"

In 1999, Austin initiated a Neighborhood Academy through the Office of Neighborhood Services in the Department of Health and Human Services. Topics ranged from grant writing to Smart Growth, and from neighborhood traffic calming to underage drinking. The program was cut after three years.

*Funding:* In 1989, the City of Seattle implemented the Neighborhood Matching Fund Program. Seattle's neighborhood planning approach is to fund projects initiated by community interests. Through an application process and a commitment of time, goods and/or money, the city provides matching funds. The program gives citizens an opportunity to voice what they would like to see and do within their communities. The program is a way for the city to meet communities and constituents halfway.

The centerpiece of Fort Worth's neighborhood planning program is the award winning Model Block Program. Under the program, the City assists up to three neighborhoods a year in creating a comprehensive plan for a ten-block area within their boundaries. One of the three neighborhoods is selected as the 'Model Block' and is then awarded a \$1.2 million dollar grant to implement its plan. Since the program's inception in 1993, fourteen neighborhood groups have received funding and ten have become community development corporations and have continued to be active in the enhancement of their area.

*Implementation:* Pittsburg has initiated a program called Blueprint Communities. This initiative raises awareness of community stakeholders about the physical, social, and economic needs of their community. As a result organizers from Blueprint Communities have experienced a more streamlined drafting and implementation process along with a process to measure outcomes and a timeline to move their process forward.

In Portland, the city has moved from neighborhood planning to a District Liaison Program that assigns one planner to each of the six districts of the city. The city planner assigned to the district navigates the city government advocating for the goals of the neighborhood. Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement directly supports district offices that oversee, and are in part governed by, their constituent neighborhood associations according to rules set out by the Office of Neighborhood Involvement. These offices are the direct, day-to-day link between the neighborhoods and city hall. They are seen as the official representatives of neighborhood interests, especially for planning and zoning issues.

In Boston the primary vehicle for contact between the mayor's office and the neighborhoods is the Department of Neighborhood Development, through which city staff are designated to act as liaisons to each of 20 officially defined neighborhoods. These liaisons facilitate service provision and resident contact with both the mayor's office and city agencies. The neighborhood liaisons also interact with the range of voluntary-sector organizations based in the neighborhoods. Boston also has Neighborhood Councils composed of residents, neighborhood associations, and businesses that help organize services and resident input in a number of neighborhoods.

## **Conclusions**

Austin has choices. Today is the day to make them. The issues have already been aired. Now is the time to choose the critical action steps. Here are the ground rules we have set forth:

- Listen to understand.
- Speak from your own experience.
- Participate to the fullest of your ability.
- Respect the time limits and the need for each person to speak.



- Remember that the purpose is not to agree but to understand diverse points of view and think together.

The capacity to make the best choices is right here in this room. I look forward to the results.

Thank you.

\*Acknowledgements: This presentation is based on a draft prepared by Chris Maxwell Gaines, graduate student in Community and Regional Planning. Chris Maxwell Gaines and Jennifer Lorca, also a graduate student in Community and Regional Planning, prepared the accompanying power point presentation.