




MEMORANDUM

TO: Parks and Recreation Board Members

FROM: Kimberly A. McNeeley, M. Ed., CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

DATE: December 21, 2022

SUBJECT: Zilker Metropolitan Park Vision Plan Community Feedback

This memo serves to update the Parks and Recreation Board on the progress and methodology of incorporating community feedback into the Zilker Metropolitan Park Vision Plan.

Summary

On November 15, 2022, the Zilker Park Vision Plan team released the [draft vision plan](#) for review and feedback. Since that time, the planning team hosted a virtual meeting on December 7, an in-person open house on December 10, and numerous pop-ups around Austin to share about the draft plan and receive feedback on the draft. At the November meeting for the Parks and Recreation Board, Vice Chair Faust requested information on how the public engagement comments and feedback would be incorporated into a future draft of the plan.

Background

The Zilker Park Vision Plan community engagement began in November 2020 with a baseline survey that received input from more than 4,000 participants. After the initial survey, the planning team was finalized, and a community engagement plan was developed by the team. The plan uses the International Association of Public Participation's Spectrum of Participation to identify the level of engagement. For the public, the plan identified the participation level as "consult" with the purpose of obtaining feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions. At the "consult" level, the organization commits to "keep the public informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision" ([IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#)). Additional key stakeholders were noted at the "involve" level, including the Zilker Neighborhood Association and organizations now included in the Zilker Collective Impact Working Group. The planning team has worked with these organizations to ensure their concerns and aspirations are reflected in the process, even when it may not be possible to include all of them in the plan.

As a standard method for identifying criteria-based decisions, the planning team created a set of planning values to guide how input should be assessed. The team presented a draft of these values, called "Guiding Principles and Goals" for community feedback. Based on the feedback received at the first meeting and the corresponding survey that followed, the final [Guiding Principles and Goals](#) were

established. Since then, future community input and feedback have been explored through the lens of these shared park values.

Equity-Centered Approach

Along with the Guiding Principles and Goals, the planning team continues to seek ways to center equity in outreach and engagement processes to reach all communities in Austin that Zilker Metropolitan Park serves. Traditional methods of engagement rely heavily on community meetings and surveys. Unfortunately, those two methods over sample community members who are white or at higher socioeconomic levels, as we have seen with the Zilker vision planning process. For example, in citywide surveys, people who identify as “White” often represent between 70 and 85% of respondents, though they make up less than 50% of the population. In addition, despite being desegregated for nearly 60 years, community members from across the city have shared that they still do not feel welcome in the park. To challenge these traditional and ongoing issues, the planning team incorporates additional well-recognized methods in considering equity in our community input. These include:

- Go to where people are.
- Offer multiple methods for giving input in multiple languages (Zilker has primarily focused on Spanish).
- Disaggregate the data, looking closely at demographic data to identify similarities and differences in data trends.
- Explore the data by weighting input to represent actual citywide demographics.

The Parks and Recreation Department has a way to go before the engagement process can be called fully equitable, but the efforts for this process have exceeded previous efforts significantly and will provide a model to improve on for future projects.

Methodology for Collecting Input

One of the most significant challenges with such a complex project and space, featuring multiple methods of engagement and input collection, is how to turn all the input and data points into a draft plan driven by stakeholder feedback. As with any project, ongoing assessment has provided the opportunity to explore and expand ways in which input is collected as the team reached out to more locations with additional prompts.

Adjustments and Ways to Give and Receive Feedback

- **Pop-Up Series:** After the first pop-up series where community members were encouraged to provide feedback solely through the survey (paper or online), the planning team heard concerns from the Parks and Recreation Board that many comments were being missed and that participants who did not want to complete the survey could not share comments. For the last two pop-up series, participants have been encouraged to share comments that are written down and posted, provide feedback on proposed amenities, respond to the Feedback survey, or review the full draft plan in person at the pop-up or online after. All comments collected are then entered on PublicInput.com and associated with the particular pop-up.
- **Surveys:** Zilker Park is a complex space, and the planning team wanted to hear from everyone about everything in Zilker. But as the fourth survey came out, there was feedback that the survey took too long to complete. The planning team remembered the theory of the “Orbits of Participation” which acknowledges that not everyone wants to invest time into all aspects of the planning process. The planning team responded by creating an abridged version of the survey that could still filter responses into the same collector and be assessed together.
- **Additional Small Groups:** During the process, the planning team realized there was not enough input around sensitive topics, especially connected with the Guiding Principle of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. To ensure the necessary voices were heard, the planning team held additional small group conversations with community leaders, including neighbors at Housing Authority City of Austin (HACA) properties nearest Zilker Park, to ensure their input was part of the process.

Incorporating Learning into Final Stage of Community Engagement

The lessons learned above have influenced how the planning team continues engagement through the draft plan feedback process.

- **Multiple Methods:** Community members have been given multiple ways to provide input:
 - Exploring the draft plan page-by-page online or in person, providing comments on each page.
 - Providing feedback in prioritizing some of the proposed new amenities through a survey online or “dot” activities at pop-ups.
 - Assessing how well the draft aligns with the Guiding Principles and Goals.
 - Providing comments that are recorded at the virtual and in-person meetings, online, or at each pop-up.
- **Multiple Locations:** Between the virtual and in-person meetings, more than 300 people participated in the opportunity to learn about the plan, ask questions, and provide comments. With more than 20 pop-ups in all 10 districts and Zilker, the total number is approaching 1,000 people who provided short comments or more detailed thoughts. The locations are also more strategic, attempting to connect to people who are already engaged in parks and public facilities, focusing additional efforts in City Council Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Challenges remain in collecting input. Residents are still underrepresented in many demographics including race/ethnicity and City Council District. The planning team has also focused primarily on

English and Spanish languages with not enough emphasis on other common languages in Austin. Finally, the spread of misinformation brings in many interested people who are eager to learn the truth, but many more are turned off by the process and disengage rather than finding more information from these opportunities.

Methodology of Assessing Input

For any project, the planning team identifies the anchors for making decisions. This decision criteria guides how it will evaluate the input that is received to incorporate it into each stage of the process. For the Zilker Park Vision Plan, the following criteria are considered when consulting the community input:

- City Code of Ordinances
- ImagineAustin
- Strategic Direction 2023
- Our Parks, Our Future: PARD Long Range Plan
- Other Department Policies or Guidance, such as the Austin Climate Equity Plan
- Zilker Park Vision Plan Guiding Principles and Goals
- Previous rounds of community input

Input received on the draft Vision Plan goes through these criteria to be sorted and coded. All comments are read and compared. Comments in common are counted, though the process is not treated as a vote, since the same participants can share their comments multiple times through multiple methods.

The sorted comments are read through again to identify where consensus can be found, what could be possible, and what may not be possible due to the decision criteria or elements that fall outside the scope of the park plan. Every effort is made to balance competing interests.

The planning team also compares the input received in previous rounds of engagement from public comments and from key stakeholders. For example, since the Zilker Neighborhood Association is a key stakeholder, the planning team has met with the organization multiple times throughout the process to hear about their desires for the park. Not all of those were included in the draft plan. However, many elements were included, such as additional green space and the removal of impervious cover. These comments have also been weighed with stakeholders who shared a desire for increased parking and vehicular access to the park. So, when the team receives a comment such as “Get rid of all of the parking at Zilker,” the planning team considers that comment against previous input, values, and the other criteria listed above when deciding how to include or not include that input in the next draft of the vision plan.

Next Steps

The feedback that is being collected during this phase will be consulted for the next draft, expected to be completed by February 2023. Once the new draft is completed, the planning team will proceed with seeking recommendations from the appropriate Boards and Commissions. The team will then return to the Parks and Recreation Board to request a final recommendation before going to Council.

Conclusion

The process is not without its challenges, which is why the planning team is committed to sharing every comment with the public. The Parks and Recreation Department recognizes that the end of the community engagement process for this project does not mean that community members cannot continue to share feedback through the Boards and Commissions and City Council.

Thank you to the Parks and Recreation Board members who have been involved in meetings, pop-ups, and reading the plan to provide feedback. The team is grateful for the ways you have shared this opportunity for the community to participate in the process. The Department hopes that the information included in this memo adequately address the questions raised by Parks Board Members at the November Board Meeting. The latest comment period ends January 8, 2023. As described in the memo, these comments will be analyzed and incorporated in the coming months. Additional workgroup discussions on this topic can be scheduled prior to a Parks and Recreation Board recommendation.

Should you have any questions, please contact Ricardo Soliz, Planning Division Manager, Parks and Recreation Department at (512) 974-9452, or at ricardo.soliz@austintexas.gov. For additional information about the Zilker Metro Park Vision Plan, please visit: <https://www.austintexas.gov/ZilkerVision>

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