

VI. COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING/URBAN DESIGN DIVISIONS

A. PROFILE

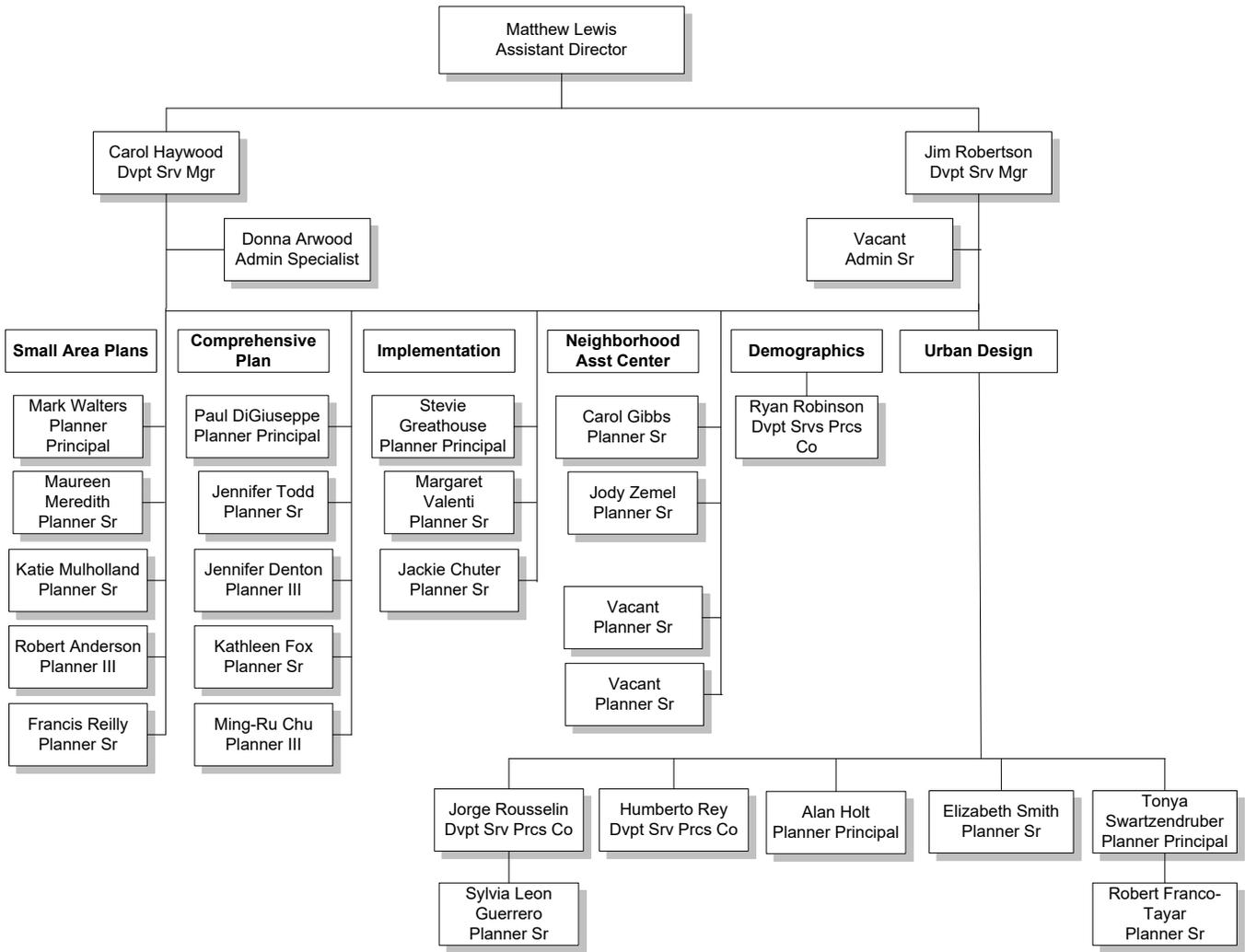
Authority

Article X of the Austin City Code establishes comprehensive planning "as a continuous and ongoing governmental function in order to promote and strengthen the existing role, processes and powers of the City of Austin to prepare, adopt and implement a comprehensive plan to guide, regulate and manage the future development within the corporate limits and extraterritorial jurisdiction of the city to assure the most appropriate and beneficial use of land, water and other natural resources, consistent with the public interest."

Organization

The organization for the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions is shown in Figure 17. The staff and functions are shown in Table 31. These may not match the current staffing but were accurate at the time we did our research. Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design are actually considered as two separate Divisions that both report to an Assistant Director. This may be primarily a semantic distinction since they both report to the same Assistant.

**Figure 17
Organization of Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions**



Staffing

The staff positions and brief description of their responsibilities, as of October 1, 2014, are shown below in Table 31.

**Table 31
Staff and Functions in Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions**

Position Title	Number of Positions	Responsibilities	Reports To
Assistant Director	1	Manages Divisions	Director
Dvpt Srv Mgr	1	Manages Comprehensive Planning Division	Assistant Director
Admin Spec	1	Administrative support to Develop Services Manager	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Neighborhood/Small Area Planning			
Principal Planner	1	Oversees the area planning processes	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Senior Planner	2	Project leads on specific small-area and neighborhood planning projects	Principal Planner
Planner III	2	Corridor and neighborhood planning project support	Principal Planner
Comprehensive Plan			
Planner Principal	1	Supervises the Imagine Austin Team and provides comprehensive plan support to other divisions	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Senior Planner	1	Supports Imagine Austin Speakers Series, reviews zoning cases for plan consistency, and provides liaison with other departments and PDRD divisions	Principal Planner
Planner III	1	Supports Imagine Austin outreach, media, and liaison programs	Principal Planner
Comprehensive Plan Implementation			
Planner Principal	1	Supervision of PDRD Implementation Team members and liaison to Capital Planning Office and other CIP related planning processes.	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Planner Sr	2	Staff support of Neighborhood Plan Contact Teams and maintenance of the Small Area Plans' Recommendation Database.	Planner Principal
Neighborhood Assistance Center			
Planner Sr	2	Provides neighborhood advisor services, information and referral, liaison with CodeNEXT, and outreach to neighborhood organizations	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Demographics			
Dvpt Srvs Prcs Co	1	Performs demographic analysis and specialized mapping for PDRD and other	Dvpt Srv Mgr

Position Title	Number of Positions	Responsibilities	Reports To
		City departments	
Urban Design			
Dvpt Srv Mgr	1	Manages Urban Design Division	Assistant Director
Admin Sr	1	Provides administrative services to the Development Services Manager	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Dvpt Srv Prcs Co	2	Project management and plan and program implementation for corridor, streetscape, and other small area plan areas, and project management for public realm design and construction projects	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Planner Principal	2	Project management, and plan and program implementation for corridor, streetscape, and other small area plan areas, and project management for public realm design and construction projects.	Dvpt Srv Mgr
Planner Sr	3	Planning and design support for TOD, corridor planning, and "Great Streets" initiative	Dvpt Srv Mgr
TOTAL	26		

Performance Measurements and Accomplishments

Table 32 presents some of the major tasks achieved since 2011 by the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Division's staff. The Divisions indicates they are working on new performance measures which is excellent.

Table 32
Performance Measures for Neighborhood Assistance, Planning, Urban Design

Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014*	2015
FTEs	4	4	4	4	2
# Requests for information completed per Neighborhood Advisor	376	269	260	250	275
# Requests for information submitted per Neighborhood Advisor	374	269	260	250	275

Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014*	2015
Neighborhood Planning					
FTEs	20	20	20	22	17
# of neighborhood plans adopted by the City Council	2	2	0	3	0
# of neighborhood plans scheduled on Planning Commission agenda	2	2	0	3	0
% participants satisfied with the Planning process	90.50%	94.4%	0%	70%	0
Urban Design					
FTEs	9	9	9	9	9
# of downtown Great Streets block faces planned per year	2.5	10	34.5	9.5	14
# new downtown Great Streets block faces completed per year	3.5	8.5	4	9.5	17.5

B. POSITIVE FINDINGS

- Recently (2012) adopted comprehensive plan;
- The newly hired assistant director managing this division (s) has taken steps to improve staff morale in the Comprehensive Planning Division (section);
- The division has been able to recruit highly qualified planners, designers, and other professionals;
- Most staff members participated enthusiastically with efforts during this study; and
- Staff members are located in the same building.

C. ORGANIZATION ISSUES

Management Structure

The Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions have experienced organizational change over the past year as the City has made the transition from drafting and adopting the "Imagine Austin" comprehensive plan to the ongoing support of its

implementation and participation in the planning for CodeNEXT, the city’s project to revise the Land Development Code (LDC). Staff members previously tasked with supporting the Imagine Austin comprehensive plan consulting team have been gradually reassigned into plan implementation support roles such as GIS support (moved to PDRD Information Technology), neighborhood group liaison and continuing public education for Imagine Austin.

The work of the Urban Design Division has remained largely unchanged. Urban Design did not play a significant role in the creation of Imagine Austin.

More significantly, the former assistant director responsible for this division retired after the adoption of Imagine Austin, leaving the position vacant between January and October of 2014. Because this retirement had been long anticipated, the division staff experienced an extended period of uncertainty and speculation regarding its future course of direction. With the recruitment and hiring of a replacement, from another nearby community, further changes in the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions organization are expected – even during the stages of completing this study.

In meeting with the divisions staff members just a few weeks after the new assistant director started work, there were many expressions of optimism in the Comprehensive Planning Division.

Project Planning and Team Management

Small area/neighborhood and corridor planning/design activities are organized in project teams, with an assigned project lead directing day-to-day work. These are relatively small interdisciplinary teams with staff levels adjusted as needed during the various stages of a project. Some of the team members, especially those with specialized design skills, may be assigned to more than one team at a single time.

Based on data extracted from the Division staff’s timesheets, some of the projects executed during 2014 included the following:

**Table 33
Major FY2014 Project Planning and Support Initiatives**

Project Name or Support Function	Number of Staff Assigned	2014 Hours Spent
Colony Park (NHCD)	3	139
South Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan	8	1,863
Land Development Code Revisions	4	444
Burnet Rd. Corridor Plan	3	1,009
Imagine Austin Implementation	7	4,663

Organizing and managing project teams with team members drawn, as needed, from the line organization is considered a best practice. Missing in this organizational arrangement are any truly effective project planning tools or reports. The City's timekeeping methods have provided a task I.D. coding system, which has allowed, with some inconsistencies, division staff to include project codes ongoing support task function codes on their timesheets. This has allowed the capture of data for hours spent on major projects and ongoing support functions over time. Upon request, managers in the division can receive reports summarizing this data. This data, when entered consistently allows managers to:

- Keep projects on track with published schedules and deadlines;
- Measure the performance of staff members on individual projects and as a whole;
- Identify staff and resource allocation issues such as overload or assignment of redundant skills; and
- Form project staffing baseline data that can be used for future project planning, budgeting, and support of division staffing requests.

121. *Recommendation:* **Implement the consistent use of and entry of Task Order Codes on timesheets used by all Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions staff members.**

122. *Recommendation:* **Create or improve the quality of existing monthly project and ongoing task performance reports based on data extracted from timesheet data.**

There appears to be no management plan or system in place for executing future neighborhood/small area and corridor plan updates or master planning efforts for the regional, community, and neighborhood centers envisioned in the Imagine Austin plan.

123. *Recommendation:* **Establish a management plan for updating existing neighborhood/small area plans and for creating new plans for corridor development, regional/community/neighborhood center master plans for the future intensive development areas specified in Imagine Austin.**

Demographer

The role of an urban demographer is to document and forecast the demands for future city services, infrastructure, and territory needed to direct city investments and growth policies in an orderly manner. In Austin, the City's demographer fills a standalone position reporting to the development services manager responsible for plan implementation. There is little oversight or accountability for this position, particularly since the demographer is frequently requested by the City Manager and others to perform tasks outside of PDRD. It is important that a city of the size and stature of Austin maintains the capabilities of a credentialed demographer, but there needs to be a clear understanding of the capabilities, functions, and deliverables of this position--particularly now, after Imagine Austin has been adopted. The current role and products produced is far too limited. This position should be integrated into the departmental work program and include a backup resource (succession planning).

In implementing the comprehensive plan demographic analysis needs to alter its focus toward plan implementation and its related issues and constraints, such as:

- Continuous validation of past growth projections.
- Provision of urgently needed detail regarding recent and projected population growth due to natural increase versus in-migration and anticipated City annexation.
- Projections of family formation, senior service demands, and single-living accommodations. These types of issues have substantial influence on future housing needs and resulting development densities.
- Validation of the holding capacities of areas designated in Imagine Austin for redevelopment, future growth areas, and future envisioned activity centers.

124. *Recommendation:* Prepare a work program, accountability measurements, and schedule of deliverables for the City Demographer that better integrates this position's role into the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions.

D. POLICY ISSUES

Imagine Austin Implementation

Imagine Austin was adopted unanimously by City Council on June 15, 2012. From the very beginnings of the process to create the plan, the Austin City Council mandated that

sustainability, as it would be defined by community input, be the foundation of the plan. Upon the completion of the planning process, sustainability became defined, in part, by the establishment of complete communities across the city. These are places where one's daily needs (housing, goods and services, employment, recreation, elements of nature, etc.) could be available within a short pedestrian, bicycle, transit, or car trip. The framework for the development of these communities is expressed in the the plan's Growth Concept Map which directs Austin to grow into a city of compact urban centers of varying intensity connected by activity corridors. These corridors serve the dual purposes of being multi-modal transportation corridors and becoming places providing daily needs.

Central to Imagine Austin is the projected population growth. The plan projects an additional 750,000 people to live within Austin and its extraterritorial jurisdiction by 2039. The activity centers, activity corridors, and context-sensitive infill development are central to accommodating this increase. The centers are distributed across the city and ETJ:

- 6 regional centers, each hosting anticipated populations of 25,000 to 45,000;
- 8 town centers, each with populations ranging between 10,000 and 30,000;
- 12 neighborhood centers with populations of 5,000 to 10,000 residents; and
- 9 job centers each accommodating varying numbers of jobs, depending on size and location.

While the plan's goals of creating a city of more compact and connected communities have met community support; they have also engendered vocal opposition from members of the community who question the veracity of the benefits of complete, compact, and connected communities and view this approach as a way to densify the city. Many of these opponents also view the comprehensive plan as a means to undermine the authority of neighborhood plans. Attempting to address their concerns while still advancing the goals of Imagine Austin has and will be a central challenge for PDRD. This will be mainly the responsibility of the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions.

A City Council mandate from the late 1990s to initiate a neighborhood planning program to develop plans for established, urban core neighborhoods has been a significant City of Austin planning function for a decade and a half. During this period very little planning attention has been given to developing area on the periphery of the city. Although a major focus of Imagine Austin, no significant planning attention has been given to the centers and corridors in these areas since the plans adoption.

125. *Recommendation: Comprehensive Planning should focus greater plan implementation and master planning resources on the regional, community,*

and neighborhood centers that are identified in the Growth Concepts Map of Imagine Austin.

As time passes, the land areas in the vicinities of the identified regional, town, and neighborhood centers will experience increased development pressure. If left unplanned and zoned for low-density suburban or estate development, these undeveloped or partially developed areas will be at increasing risk of permanent loss due to preemptive low density development. Procedures are needed to reserve these areas for future activity center development.

Following the adoption of Imagine Austin, the City of Austin began implementation of the priority programs including updating the City's Land Development Code with the CodeNEXT project. While the CodeNEXT consulting team's Land Development Diagnosis Report identified the future emergence of the proposed activity centers and the requirements for appropriate zoning, the report underplayed the importance of these areas as the containers of most of Austin's future growth. Most of the CodeNEXT main focus to date has been on existing neighborhoods, downtown, and other established areas. The greatest opportunities for future community building and implementing the goals of the comprehensive plan will be in the Greenfield development center areas where the largest share of Austin's future inhabitants will reside.

126. *Recommendation:* Add emphasis to Imagine Austin's proposed new regional, town, and neighborhood centers in the CodeNEXT LDC update process.

Comprehensive plans in most urban cities in the U.S. include infrastructure elements with accompanying maps that conceptualize long-range utility service areas, treatment plants, and other key utility components. These are not present in the Imagine Austin plan. While the plan does provide reference to the need to coordinate with Austin Utilities and other agencies in their infrastructure planning efforts, there is little regard to the enormity of extending infrastructure and expanding (nearly doubling) capacities to accommodate the City's projected growth over the next 25 years.

127. *Recommendation:* Working with Austin Utilities and departments responsible for other infrastructure services, prepare and adopt an infrastructure element for Imagine Austin.

The same principle applies to long-range transportation facilities needed to support Envision Central Texas. The 2035 Regional Transportation Plan of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) has based its improvement recommendations on a series of large, medium, and small growth centers that appear to be based in the City's 1979 Comprehensive Plan for contiguous, circumferential development rather than the decentralized satellite activity centers in the current Plan. Inserting the activity centers depicted in the Growth Concept Map Centers of Imagine Austin is likely to have substantial impact on CAMPO's transportation modeling and planning outcome, as the organization undertakes its 2040 plan update.

128. *Recommendation: Continue coordination activities with the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization to include the Growth Concept Centers Map in their transportation planning process.*

Although the following may veer off our normal analysis and trend into the planning area, we think it is worth the City considering the following alternatives:

- Hire a seasoned real estate development professional at the Assistant Director level to head up a small task force (new hires and/or PDRD staff) aimed specifically in forming a New Communities Development Strategy.
- Based on the priorities established in the New Communities Development Strategy (above), retain the services of a real estate development consultant to undertake site selection, acquire land options, and lead in the formation of development venture entities.
- At the Mayoral and City Manager levels, ensure that all City departments responsible for streets, parks, utilities, and other infrastructure are working in accord with the concepts of Imagine Austin and the priorities specified in the New Communities Development Strategy. The same applies to non-City entities such as school districts, county agencies, and the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

129. *Recommendation: The City should consider the three planning strategies outlined above.*

Neighborhood and Small Area Planning

Neighborhood-level planning has been integral to the planning process in Austin for many years. Through formation of "neighborhood plan contact teams" (NPCTs), the current LDC allows NPCT members to initiate amendments to Future Land Use Map (FLUM) and affords them greater status in responding to zoning changes through submittal of a formal Contact Team Recommendation Letter. The focus on central city neighborhoods has also created inequity among those areas with neighborhood plans and those without. The capacity of Comprehensive Planning staff to address this inequity by creating plans and forming contact teams for those unplanned areas is hampered by resources and the time required creating these plans. In addition, continuing the approaches used in earlier planning efforts will result in increased staff attrition and the loss of experienced and talented planners. Ultimately, the decision as whether and how to address this inequality will be a political one and resides with the elected officials.

The Comprehensive Planning Division includes a group in the organization structure called the Neighborhood Assistance Center. It was formed to assist neighborhood groups by providing guidance on code enforcement, neighborhood crime watch, trees and landscaping, community clean-ups, and similar topics.

The importance of neighborhood planning was reaffirmed in the 2008-2012 Imagine Austin planning efforts through an extensive array of public meetings, workshops, social media, and other outreach efforts. The Imagine Austin plan document includes explicit reference to the continuing validity of established neighborhood plans and ongoing neighborhood, small area, and corridor planning projects.

It appears, however, that the definition of the actual physical boundaries of neighborhoods has been inconsistent and, in some instances, incoherent. In the initial stages of neighborhood planning, boundaries were initiated by neighborhood associations and defined by those geographies rather than the traditional perception of a neighborhood (often based on school attendance patterns or common geographical characteristics). In many cases, the boundary line between two neighborhood plan areas would be the centerline of a major street--leaving the street faces to be addressed in separate planning projects. The acreages and population levels of neighborhood plan areas vary substantially. Some neighborhood organizations have been very active, others inactive.

As of 2014, there are 53 active neighborhood planning areas (NPSs) with approved plans, 4 that suspended plans, and 3 areas that have been designated as future NPAs. These NPAs cover a diminishing fraction of the City's land area. As the City continues to grow, it will be increasingly challenging for staff to maintain a cycle of plan updates, provide new planning initiatives for existing areas or neighborhoods that lack plans, or to support the planning requirements for the new communities that will emerge within the 26 or so new activity centers postulated in Imagine Austin. Staff in the Comprehensive Planning Division have recognized this challenge and have acted to redefine the neighborhood plan update cycle by performing plan updates for combined neighborhoods (such as in South Austin) and by placing greater emphasis on small-area or corridor plans, which can span

existing neighborhood boundaries. The City's recent "10-1" conversion toward representation is likely to influence further the future configuration of NPAs.

130. ***Recommendation:*** **Initiate a long-term process to consider redefining neighborhood planning boundaries and reorganize neighborhood contact groups into a larger, geographically coherent, and more manageable number of entities.**

The neighborhood advocacy functions of the Neighborhood Assistance Center and of some staff members in the Small Area Plan Implementation group are perceived by others in the Comprehensive Planning Division as being incompatible to the larger long-range planning and design functions of the division. This has contributed to organizational stress, low morale, and the lack of consensus in the division's mission.

131. ***Recommendation:*** **Provide stronger supervision, better definition of work programs, and measurable performance goals for the Neighborhood Assistance Center.**

E. PROCESS ISSUES

Future Land Use Map (FLUM) Consistency Review

The Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions are responsible for reviewing all permit applications for consistency with the FLUM. One staff member of the Imagine Austin implementation team and a principal planner conducts these reviews. This is the only role that the Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Divisions have in the application development process. This is a routine task that seldom requires the proficiency of a principal planner.

132. ***Recommendation:*** **Delegate the FLUM consistency review to a subordinate position, or reassign it entirely to the Land Use Division while maintaining coordination with the Imagine Austin Implementation team.**

