



DRAFT CODE REVIEW

June 6, 2017

Landscape architects are uniquely qualified to help inform Austin's draft land development code during the CodeNEXT process. Through our training and professional practices, we have expertise integrating community values and natural systems through the design of our built environment. Foremost, we understand the innate connection people feel with nature known as biophilia. Landscape architects meet the standards of the land development code while creating vibrant places.

We see the re-writing of Austin's land development code as an opportunity to make our city more ecologically resilient, more economically vibrant, and more socially equitable. We want to affirm those aspects of the draft code that will well serve the public's interests in health, safety, and welfare. We also want to offer recommendations for improvements that will help us attain the goals established in the *Imagine Austin* comprehensive plan.

The ASLA-CTX position paper on the first draft of the code draws upon advances in sustainable site design and green infrastructure and it applies best practices for shaping the environment. The comments have been organized around the five topics presented at the Environment Topic Talk: Water Stewardship, Flood Mitigation, Urban Forest Protection and Replenishment, Open Space and Parks, and Nature in the City.

WATER STEWARDSHIP

Austin has faced the challenge of drought in recent years and we should incorporate what we have learned into our standards for the future. Sustainable landscapes protect potable water resources through the use of native and adapted trees and plants, efficient irrigation systems, and natural landscape buffers. Development should conserve water and keep waterways healthy through innovative design and smart maintenance practices. Landscape architects bring professional experience with water conservation solutions. They are uniquely prepared to help shape the proposals to achieve Imagine Austin's goal of Sustainable Water Management.

We support the draft code's provisions for the on-site beneficial use of stormwater for irrigation and infiltration. We highly commend the City for more aggressively promoting Green Infrastructure and Low Impact Development practices, including the proposed retention standard (23-3D-6030(C)).

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Concerns:

Water Quality Controls: This standard reduces the amount of sediments that reach our bodies of water. The threshold of new and redeveloped impervious cover for watersheds other than a Barton Springs Zone watershed should be reduced from 8,000 s.f. to 5,000 s.f. to compensate for the smaller minimum lot sizes established in the draft code.

Waterway and Flood Plain Protection: Healthy plant communities with rich biodiversity along waterways provide buffers that reinforce banks and trap migrating sediments. In Critical Water Quality Zones, low impact park development is allowed that does not significantly alter existing vegetation. Many stream banks, however, have been altered by invasive plant species. The code should be flexible to encourage landscape restoration projects that remove invasive plants that are not contributing to bank stability and that have maintenance plans that provide temporary erosion control while new native plants are established.

Austin Water Forward: The Austin Water Forward effort is examining our water supply and demand for the next 100 years. Since this plan will not be released until July 2018, however, opportunities to holistically incorporate its recommendations into the land development code might be missed. One important topic concerns demand management strategies, including those that may propose placing restrictions on the irrigated land area within developments. Innovations in irrigation technologies have improved the efficiency of these systems, thereby reducing potable water usage. Based on current best practices, demand water management strategies should distinguish between drip and spray irrigation methods and should base any metrics on the percentage of the lot irrigated, not a prescriptive area.

FLOOD MITIGATION

Austin's creeks and waterways are highly prized by our citizens, but heavy rainfall sometimes leads to loss of property and life as well as environmental damage. Sustainable landscapes help to infiltrate stormwater down to the underground water table. Soaking rainwater into the ground reduces runoff from impervious surfaces that can compromise streams by carrying pollutants to the waterway and eroding banks.

We support that redevelopment will be required to provide flood mitigation—not only new development (23-10E-3010). We also agree with the use of parking lot landscape medians for stormwater management (23-4E-4070).

Concerns:

Impervious Cover: In some areas, the newly proposed land use zones have increased the maximum amount of building and impervious cover. The Watershed Protection Department should continue to work with property developers during the site plan and subdivision process to ensure that

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downstream properties are not negatively affected. We support the department's use of watershed modeling to pinpoint effective strategies for stormwater management.

Localized flooding: Single-family development outside of subdivisions is not reviewed during the building permit or inspection process to determine any contribution to flooding problems, yet these projects can lead to localized flooding of downstream properties. New requirements for green infrastructure features like rain gardens and porous pavement might help retain excess stormwater on site.

Missing Middle projects: The draft code allows the Development Services Director to waive Site Plan submittal requirements for residential applications of three to nine units in a Transect Zone in an Urban Watershed (23-6B-2020). The provisions do not state which submittal requirements may be waived. While ASLA-CTX supports the construction of Missing Middle housing to offer diverse and affordable housing choices, the requirements for drainage and on-site beneficial reuse should not be waived, especially in the urban core where this type of housing might be concentrated. Adequate pervious open space for stormwater infiltration can be maintained while meeting our goals for a Compact and Connected City.

URBAN FOREST PROTECTION and REPLENISHMENT

Austin's urban forest provides an approximately \$16 billion value of ecosystem services to the city. One of the most important is its ability to mitigate urban heat island effects. As the city grows denser with buildings, the heat island effect will intensify and the value of urban trees will increase accordingly.

We support the draft code's provisions for the new categories of Young Public Trees and Keystone Trees and the continuance of the Protected and Heritage Trees categories. We agree that greenfield development shall protect intact wooded areas with contiguous canopy coverage and that where no tree canopy exists, the emphasis shall be on aggressive tree planting. We also support prioritizing the preservation of individual trees in urban infill development (23-3C-1030).

Concerns:

Missing Middle projects: Similar to the concerns for maintaining pervious open space in Missing Middle projects above, the requirements for tree preservation and mitigation should not be waived. Preservation of the urban tree canopy to mitigate the urban heat island should be a high priority in Missing Middle zones.

Commercial Remodels: Currently, projects seeking site plan exemptions for commercial remodels cannot disturb more than 3,000 s.f. Therefore, they cannot remove asphalt or concrete from a surface parking lot to plant trees. We support the ability to disturb more than 3,000 s.f. for the explicit purpose of tree planting and green infrastructure elements.

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OPEN SPACE AND PARKS

Austin's open space and parks provide the backbone of Austin's reputation as a green oasis in the heart of Texas. Access to both public and private open spaces are critical components to ensure connection to nature and for recreational opportunities. While we have a high proportion of public parkland in the city, we do not meet our goal of a park within one-quarter mile of every resident in the urban core. In fact, we have areas that are "parks deserts" or park deficient areas – especially along some transit corridors. For private developments over 2 acres, our current private open space ordinance requires 5% open space. The Parkland Dedication Ordinance allows publicly accessible private open space to count toward the parkland dedication requirements.

We support the incorporation of the Parkland Dedication Ordinance in the draft code and the inclusion of Civic and Open Space types which range from large neighborhood parks to small pocket parks and plazas. The variations in size and type address a range of needs from greenfield to infill development. We also support private open space for trees, stormwater infiltration, and amenities.

Concerns:

Parkland Dedication: The current ordinance and draft code allows fee-in-lieu for required dedication under 6 acres (23-3B-3010). We believe that pocket parks should be required to be built either on-site or nearby off-site for any required dedication over 0.25 acres.

Preserves and Urban Trails: Preserves and Urban Trails are missing elements in the draft code and need to be addressed in the upcoming draft.

Green Infrastructure and Open Space: The draft code should clarify the integration of Green Infrastructure and Open Space. These multi-functional spaces increase connectivity and offer opportunities for diverse active recreation. Open space standards for this hybrid landscape setting have not yet been defined.

People and Civic Space: Draft code standards should facilitate the use of civic space for passive and active recreation. Good urban landscape design creates a green network of people places- from intimate courtyards, to trails, to large parks for all ages and users. Civic space should have zones for sitting and gathering to facilitate many types of activities during the day and after-hours.

Private Open Space Requirements: There are over 10 different areas in the draft code that address open space requirements. These areas need to be coordinated in the next draft of the code with clear applicability and more detailed standards such as requirements for trees, pervious areas, and green infrastructure.

NATURE IN THE CITY

The integration of nature into the city and the city in to nature is fundamental to Austin's environmental ethic. Texas's amazing shade trees offer the chance to be outside even during our long, hot summers. Context-sensitive landscape design creates urban micro-climates with shade and breezes to activate civic and private spaces. In addition to tree protection and open space ordinances, the landscape

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ordinance provides the final green component at the site scale. Landscape architects, who design with both construction materials and ecological systems, are the professionals most qualified to integrate Imagine Austin's priority for Green Infrastructure with its priority for Compact and Connected.

We support an updated landscape ordinance that corresponds to both urban and suburban development types. We support the new submittal requirements that call for a Site Analysis of environmental features and for the Landscape Architect to be the authorized professional.

Overall Concerns:

Stakeholder Review: The landscape ordinance and its coordination with other components of the code need stakeholder review with the landscape architecture community. The original landscape ordinance was crafted by private professionals working in tandem with staff. We need to return to this level of engagement and sharing of expertise.

Specific Concerns:

Missing Elements: Requirements for Green Streets and the Functional Green program are missing from the current draft. Green Streets requirements should address street trees and bio-swales in the right-of-way for stormwater management. The elements of Functional Green program for zones with over 80% impervious cover need to be described in broad language. Even though the detail is supposed to be placed in the Environmental Criteria Manual (ECM), the community needs to understand the implications of the requirements as they might affect a site plan.

Setbacks: Proposed front setback depths need to be increased to ensure a green network for a walkable city and adequate space for tree and shrub planting. Expand the landscape compatibility buffers to include green infrastructure such as green roofs, green walls, bio-swales, hedges and green sound walls.

Tree Soil Volume Requirements: Soil volume requirements for trees may not adequately consider constrained urban conditions, especially considering underground utilities. Various site conditions should be rigorously tested prior to adoption.

Frontage Types: Urban transect frontage types, such as forecourts and galleries, should be balanced with the need for trees in the right-of-way or the front landscape zone. Downtown Great Streets standards provide continuity along the public streetscape, but architectural galleries that encroach into the right-of-way could displace the rhythm and function established by the planted design. The frontage types language should include the requirement to balance the continuity of shade trees with frontage elements that promote an engaging street life. Context-sensitive standards need to be developed for different settings, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

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CONCLUSION

Austin has been and is a Green City, but it might not always remain so. Due to the increase in density proposed in *Imagine Austin*, landscape elements need to be carefully considered and protected to preserve the future legacy of our city as a green oasis through CodeNEXT.

The members of ASLA-CTX are leaders in placemaking. With our ability to integrate nature and community through design, construction, and development, we hope to work with city staff and other stakeholders to shape the draft land development code until it is adopted by the City Council. We envision the continuance and enhancement of a Green Austin as the legacy of our professional commitment to the city, its institutions, and its residents.