

December 10, 2013

To: Mr. George Zapalac and the Opticos Team,

I am writing you as a concerned citizen, but you know about my current leadership role with Austin Neighborhoods Council (ANC), the only umbrella neighborhood organization in Austin and a major stakeholder in this Land Development Code revision.

I have tried to format a few questions and concerns regarding the Land Development Code Revision process, and I want to emphasize the importance for the inclusion of ANC in this process. Clarification would help our ANC membership and ANC board understand **our role** in this “comprehensive” revision process. I understand that **Opticos is being assisted** in their neighborhood information gathering process. **Where is the public/community component of this local assistance?**

Might I suggest that ANC should be and certainly is one of the most important resources that the consultant team could use for collecting data and compiling community inventories? **Without the inclusion of neighborhoods in this process with “the consultants,” the body of work, the data, and the raw input from the public will not be complete or accurately representative.** This process is not just about professionals, especially since public support for any end products/processes ensures more value.

ANC should be the public linkage for this process, which would be a great benefit for the COA staff and the consultant team. Furthermore, the benefits to the City Council with this collaborative, public support are not to be underestimated. This is precisely how important a stakeholder group such as **ANC could be used as an ally** in this process. Therefore, due to the fact that ANC is divided into 10 sectors covering every square inch of the Austin area, **ANC would be a powerful resource for the consultant team, Opticos.**

My hope is that we would be approached and used as a significant partner for input in a collaborative experience. We all live in neighborhoods with differing qualities and elements ranging from good to bad; sifting through these elements and evaluating what is valuable to a particular place **should be most useful coming from those who live in a particular place/neighborhood.** Therefore, a clearer **evaluation of what constitutes a neighborhood/community inventory in context could be achieved.**

The first question I have is about **determining the community inventory.** **What is required of ANC?** We are disappointed to not have been directly engaged in this part of the information gathering process. Until we are engaged, and until we are assured that the most basic neighborhood data—the existing Neighborhood Development Plans currently on file with the City, for example—have been examined and used to help define the character (Opticos’s DNA?) of these neighborhoods, we will continue to be disappointed.

There are many Neighborhood Plans in the urban core, which already exist and explicitly state priorities and define the elements that make the planning area/neighborhood a place. These Neighborhood Plans should make easy work for the consultant team. **How have these Neighborhood Plans been incorporated by the Opticos Team?** For example, in the CANSNP 2004, the **first priority and goal is to preserve the integrity and character of the single-family neighborhoods**. I also know that this priority/goal appears in many Neighborhood Plans. How will the consultants take this into account when evaluating single-family property and zoning? How a Neighborhood Plan defines character may not be synonymous with the **Opticos Team's definition of character** (unique sense of place linked with preservation of the existing charming and historic fabric/housing with "inscale" new development, especially with multi-family properties-the modest 3-4 unit developments replaced with out of scale larger units). **How exactly is Opticos defining character? How is the consultant team evaluating character? What specific elements are they looking for?** (Might this be something where ANC could be helpful in gathering data?)

I would have assumed that the consultant team has already reviewed these existing Neighborhood Plans. But what public assurances are there that this has happened? **Is there a template from Opticos** where we can direct our input? Also, as a member of the public, I would like to know how the data would be sorted and evaluated?

On the other hand, there are areas outside and inside the urban core without Neighborhood Plans. **How will Opticos evaluate these areas without Neighborhood Plans?** (This has not been clarified to my satisfaction.) The main point for both areas with Neighborhood Plans and those without is that ANC and neighborhoods need to understand what to protect and how to defend and preserve the intent of these Neighborhood Plans, and how they define their particular neighborhood character.

The understanding of the Neighborhood Plans and their intent is the baseline information required to evaluate, understand, and have a reference for the important concept of **inevitable change** that faces every neighborhood. Among the other criteria, the change must be acceptable, welcome, and **"fitting" with the values of that community**. **The more informed an area is in advance of change will** provide the opportunity for understanding and thus the acceptance of that change. This is the most delicate of issues, and probably the most important.

Another important question that needs to be answered is **about the "methodology"** for gathering neighborhood code and character information and data. This is **an important part of the revisionist process for the public to understand**, particularly in connection with the questions asked in the survey (online due 12/13) and the questions from the Listening Sessions in October 2013.

Since no explanation was given about just exactly how answers might be interpreted, it is not clear how these questions will be interpreted or used to determine code. Giving the "benefit-of-doubt" that there is not a predetermined focus on form-based code, **the public needs to know the context for their input**. Additionally, there may be other terms and

definitions needed for the public to understand the position of the consultant team—**terms such as *residential versus commercial*, etc.** Intent clauses or paragraphs need to be returned to the new code. **We also need to know the tradeoffs** (if required) **for certain amenities**; for example, what would be the tradeoffs for expensive light rail or pedestrian amenities? **An authentic community process needs input and explanations “in context.”**

One of the reasons that I am writing to you is that **we need you**, as the Project Manager for the City of Austin, **to keep the community informed and to collaborate with your community partners.** Since ANC will be a major stakeholder group in this rewrite process, I would encourage your input and collaboration. With the January 14th upcoming meetings concerning “community inventory,” **what neighborhoods will be included in that process? How should ANC prepare for these meetings?**

We would be particularly concerned about determining the future code about what, where, and how much may be built, and how and when it will be used. We are also concerned about **compact and connected communities, but not at the expense of losing that which makes our neighborhoods a valuable and defining element of Austin’s charm and allure, not to mention economic value, to future residents and visitors.**

Neighborhoods are an underestimated economic resource for Austin, which the consultant team and the City staff need to respect in this code revision process. Most importantly, we all need information from a source we can trust. That source would be you, the Project Manager.

I know that this letter contains many questions that I hope you will be able to answer in the next couple weeks, perhaps before the New Year, 2014, begins?

Thank you for your attention and continued good faith efforts to strengthen the bonds between the community and the city supported, consultant driven Land Development Code revision process.

Respectfully,

Mary Ingle
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