

January 31, 2015 Green Infrastructure Working Group Meeting Notes

Introduction and welcome by Council Member Ann Kitchen.

Review of relevant goals and priorities of Imagine Austin by Mike Personett (Assistant Director, Watershed Protection Department)

The Green Infrastructure Working Group's efforts will be primarily related to the following Imagine Austin priority programs:

1. Compact and connected
2. Sustainably manage our water resources
3. Green Infrastructure
4. Healthy Austin

CodeNEXT is the process by which we can integrate these Imagine Austin priorities into the Land Development Code.

Introduction to the CodeNEXT process and timeline by George Zapalac (City of Austin, Planning and Development Review)

Imagine Austin represents the community vision for Austin's future—it is a constant source of reference for decision-making, but it doesn't provide specific regulations to guide the land development process. One of the 8 priority programs specifies that the Land Development Code must be revised. The current code has not been comprehensively revised in this way since 1984. The complexity of the Code convolutes the permitting and approval process for all parties—the current process cannot keep up with Austin's rapid growth. It is also an essential tool for implementing Imagine Austin.

At the moment we are at Step 3 of a 4 step process to revise the Land Development Code:

1. Listening and Understanding (July 2013 – February 2014)
2. Diagnosis, Alternative Approaches, and Outline (September 2013 – October 2014)
3. Preliminary Draft Code (June 2015 – November 2015)
4. Code Adoption (December 2015)

Environmental issues that will be considered during the CodeNEXT process:

- Activity centers and corridors
- Redevelopment and Infill
- Green Infrastructure
- Consistency and clarity

City Council selected the "Deep Clean and Reset" approach to code revisions, with the following additions:

- Extensive rewrite of content as necessary
- **Focus on green infrastructure and sustainable water resources**
- Enable a broader application of form-based codes

Working groups have been established to consider more detailed input on:

1. Affordability (CodeNEXT Advisory Group)
2. Infill, compatibility, and missing middle housing (CodeNEXT Advisory Group)
3. Obstacles to small business (CodeNEXT Advisory Group)
4. Subdivision regulations (City Staff led)

5. Green Infrastructure (City Staff led)

Next Steps:

CodeTALK on green infrastructure Spring 2015

Draft Code for public review Spring 2016

(Opportunities for public, board and commission, and Council input at each step)

Overview of topics that will be discussed in the GI Working Group (Matt Hollon and Erin Wood, Watershed Protection Department).

(The following represents comments that are not reflected in the power point slides—please refer to the presentation as well. Presentation URL:

http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Watershed/watershed_ordinance/GIWG_slideshow_2015_01_30.pdf.)

Land Cover and Natural Function

Goals:

Impervious Cover is tightly correlated to environmental health, but limits our scope to what we *don't* want. Limiting impervious cover does not always ensure the provision of natural function. We are missing other factors. Our goal is to protect and maintain the natural function of “greenfield” sites (never developed sites) and restore function on “greyfield” sites (redevelopment sites). How can we restore degraded sites? And to what level?

We want to incorporate restorative design into the code, in a way that prepares us for long-term success given the challenges of drought and climate change. We can help build this capacity, in the words of the Austin Water Resource Planning Task Force final report, “using the cityscape as water supply”, i.e. using impervious cover as a catchment and storing and infiltrating this water in the soil and storage tanks. In doing so, we convert a perceived negative (impervious cover) into a positive (water storage and use to augment our water supply and keep our creeks and landscapes healthy).

Austin Water Resource Planning Task Force final report URL:

http://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Water/AustinWaterResourcePlanningTaskForce_ReportToCityCouncil.pdf

Challenges:

There are numerous drawbacks to medium to high levels of imperviousness. We wish to focus mainly on the Urban and Suburban watersheds, which have fairly high impervious cover limits. We do not want to promote sprawl, but neither do we want to sacrifice a site's natural function. We need to decrease the *effective* impervious cover. (It is important to note, however, that this discussion does not mean that impervious cover limits are not necessary, especially in Water Supply watersheds.)

We also want to promote *purposeful* open space. Current impervious cover limits produce a landscape with fragmented pervious areas that do not confer the same function as a larger pervious area. We would like to promote connected open space. This point is especially important considering the emphasis on the compact and connected priority program—if we want to accommodate population growth in centers and corridors, they need to be attractive places to live and provide connectivity for alternative transportation, such as walking and bicycling.

Landscaping and Green Transitions

Goals:

- Achieve multiple benefits (mimic natural systems/do many positive things in limited space)
- Preservation of trees (ensure the placement, space, and soil volume necessary to thrive)
- Need to keep more water onsite (for environmental health and water conservation)
- Provide harmonious transitions for infill development (with landscaping offering promising solutions) (Note: ASLA has requested to make a proposal on this topic.)
- Make any requirements practical to use and implement (note: 2010 commercial landscape ordinance has not worked entirely as planned; we want to ensure our present efforts carefully consider implementation and maintenance)

Challenges:

- Small businesses and small property owners will be concerned with costs (we will need to conference with the Small Business Working Group on this point)
- Existing “street yard” requirements (function of site layout with respect to roadways) is dependent on context, working well in some cases and not in others. We need solutions that fit all contexts.

Comment: Green infrastructure will likely play a key role in softening development and infill in relatively intense centers and corridors so that they work well with the rest of the city fabric.

Beneficial Use of Stormwater

- This topic will likely include a staff proposal since it was discussed at length in stakeholder meetings last year.
- Need to beneficially use all of the water that is falling on Austin. With an extended drought and our water supply lakes at 35% capacity, the time for action is now! And creeks and waterways are critically dependent on infiltration of water into the soil as well.

Materials from past stakeholder meetings: <http://www.austintexas.gov/page/watershed-protection-ordinance-stakeholder-meetings>

Stormwater Options for Redevelopment/Infill

- Need a flexible system: to balance economic health with other community interests.
- Want to encourage the redevelopment, not just remodeling, of older properties, since this provides water quality protection, landscape retrofits, and other community benefits.
- Need to find a way to address existing flooding.
- Need solutions that work for small businesses.
- Consider ways to enable the Barton Springs Zone Redevelopment Exception to help balance environmental and economic health in the Imagine Austin centers in the Barton Springs Zone.
- Challenge: We are asking property owners to take on a new responsibility—a new level of participation with the maintenance of on-site green infrastructure. We need a new culture of water stewardship. How do we get there?

Additional Topics and Concerns from meeting participants

1. Breakpoints/thresholds of ecological systems, and the danger of compromise given these thresholds
2. Redevelopment and retrofit in areas with pre-existing problems
3. Burden on new developers to fix old problems; tax districts for projects
4. Review process is cumbersome and adversarial
5. Need to take a holistic view of urban streams and redevelopment
6. Restore pre-development hydrology
7. Linkages between LID/open space and human use (Parkland dedication vs. Payment-in-lieu); need meaningful open space
8. Potential conflict between subdivision working group and this GI working group; need to collaborate and confer with them early
9. Restorative vs. minimizing harm; need to distinguish between the two
10. Should overlay and distribute watershed and growth concept maps; identify problem areas
 - a. District profiles
 - b. Upper vs. lower watersheds have different needs
11. Integration with Transportation and Public Works (Complete Streets and Green Streets)
12. Explore connection with ecodistricts
13. Conservation, integration, cyclical, resource balancing (regenerative)
14. Definition of "open space"
15. Monitoring and maintenance of green infrastructure