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# Livable Places Update

*Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design*

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**Texas Cities at the Cutting Edge of Smart Growth:** Groundbreaking efforts in Smart Growth are popping up in an unexpected place – Texas! After two years of work, Austin officials have come out with a vision for growth that is the first we know of to directly condemn the suburban development of the past and send future growth in their city in a completely new direction. Meanwhile, the city of El Paso is pursuing another first, that of employing a form-based code to create a mixed-use airport!

The City of Austin has been brutally forthcoming about the failure of the City's planning and zoning policies. *Imagine Austin*, the City's new vision document, points out that the pattern of growth in the City over the past 60 years has come, "at a troubling price in terms of social segregation and isolation, public health, air and water quality, loss of natural open space and agricultural lands, and climate change, driving up the public costs for roads, water lines, and other infrastructure that must be continually extended to far-flung new development." The document goes on to state that, "at least 20 percent of our children live in poverty, go to bed hungry, go without health insurance and adequate health care, and fail to graduate from high school." The poor are all concentrated in the same part of town, dictated by a comprehensive plan prepared in the 1920s that made apartheid official city policy.

*Imagine Austin*, once it is adopted by the City Council, will serve as the City's proposed comprehensive plan and will serve as the community's official philosophy for managing new growth. The plan envisions that an expected population increase of 700,000 will be accommodated in mixed-use development along corridors served by transit consisting of new centers of housing, businesses, shops and restaurants north and south of the City's downtown. The plan calls for a range of housing options, including, but not limited to, apartments and condos, all located near transit lines where people can shop, work, and play.

The plan addresses most every issue of governance in general terms including such measures as calling for more robust partnerships between city businesses, schools and nonprofits to create job-training programs. It calls for the city to use its two main powers – zoning and taxation, to assure that future growth occurs in the desired compact, walkable clusters of homes and businesses along transit lines.

*Imagine Austin* was created by the city planning staff using input from the general

public and a 31-member citizen committee appointed by the Austin City Council. The document is intended to guide every city decision over the next thirty years.

More public input is still being accepted and modifications may be made until next spring when the City Council is scheduled to adopt a final plan. After that, the City staff will spend another year writing the ordinances necessary to eventually make the plan a reality.

*Imagine Austin* will continue as a living document even after its adoption. The city charter has been modified to require it to be reviewed every year and updated every five years. According to the chair of the city's planning commission, "If we make mistakes in creating it, we can correct them."

Meanwhile, the City of El Paso, Texas has seen the value capture inherent in using a form-based code and has taken the unusual step of applying this technique to something as unconventional as an airport. El Paso officials recognize that some things will always be separated from residential uses, but often can still be walkable in context. Just because the FAA prohibits single-family residential housing from locating near flight patterns doesn't mean that the other uses on the site can't be complementary to one another and the rest of the city.

El Paso leaders started planning the redevelopment of their airport with the goal of giving the workers in the district somewhere to walk for lunch and the guests at the airport hotels an interesting and walkable retail street. With this goal in mind, the El Paso Airport has been reworked to mix industrial, commercial and hotel uses together.

**Explore San Diego's Smart Growth Neighborhoods With The Experts:** San Diego was one of the first cities in the nation to intentionally plan for and develop transit-oriented development. Under the leadership of former San Diego Mayor and former California Governor Pete Wilson, the City was also an early leader in bringing the mall downtown, away from the freeway.

Thus, it is appropriate that the Local Government Commission offer attendees at the 2012 New Partners for Smart Growth conference in San Diego the opportunity to do some in-depth exploring of the City and region. Tour leaders will be walkability guru Dan Burden, LGC Associate Director Paul Zykofsky and local experts from Walk San Diego and the San Diego Association of Governments. Those who join this 3-day, pre-conference tour will

travel by foot, trolley and coach bus to explore San Diego's downtown older classic neighborhoods, more recent transit-oriented neighborhoods, and suburban downtowns. Each stop will offer an opportunity to learn the history and study the workings of these jewels of the San Diego region.



The Gaslamp District, one of the stops on the San Diego Smart Growth Tour 2012.

The tour begins January 30th and ends February 1, in time for the opening of the 2012 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference. To learn more and / or to register, go to [www.newpartners.org/features.html](http://www.newpartners.org/features.html).

**Builders See New Market For Infill; Face Challenges:** The foreclosure crisis has brought some important lessons. While still somewhat challenged, infill properties in mixed-use neighborhoods and downtowns have retained their value much better than houses built in single-use, auto-dependent development. A few smart developers are now recognizing that there is more demand for homes in walkable neighborhoods and neighborhoods near transit than for housing located in single-use sprawl.

We can look to Portland, Oregon to see what may soon emerge in California. In 2008, a major Portland development company, Renaissance, known for its sprawling subdivisions on the fringes of the Portland market, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Two years ago, the company completed a reorganization plan. Today, Renaissance is the top general contractor in the City of Portland — building mostly one-off houses in long-established neighborhoods.

The company is looking to build a modest 100 homes a year by 2013, down from the 360 a year that they were building in the Portland suburbs. One of their strategies is to tear down and replace bank-owned houses that are located in popular neighborhoods but that are in serious disrepair. These provide the look and the charm of an older home but without the accompanying, ongoing repair requirements. All Renaissance homes now have LEED certification.

While they are in a strong recovery mode, this developer has run into some risky and expensive obstacles along the way, problems that they never experienced when they were building suburban neighborhoods. In suburban development, sites are closely grouped with plenty of space for equipment, whereas city sites are spread out, lack the advantages of scale and can be difficult to stage and staff. Just finding a place to park a concrete truck is now a major challenge.

In a new suburban development the entire infrastructure is new. By contrast, infill development often requires increased sewer or electrical capacity to address the increased demand from new homes. A developer building just a few homes may be asked to upgrade the infrastructure for the entire neighborhood, but doesn't have the ability to spread the costs among all the homes that will benefit from the upgrade.

A new development in the suburbs offers plenty of suitable lots upon which to build, whereas trying to find and secure suitable lots from multiple owners in an existing neighborhood can be very difficult, time consuming, and costly. The cost of parking is higher in infill neighborhoods because land usually costs more in these areas, thus local government minimum parking standards can prevent a new project from penciling out.

Securing a permit to build multiple houses in a brand new residential neighborhood can be a breeze compared with getting a permit for a single house in an infill area. Finally, the profit that a builder can make on an infill house is smaller than in the burbs, leaving the builder or developer no room for error.

We are hearing identical stories from smaller California infill developers and builders. Because the work they do revitalizing our downtowns and older neighborhoods is key to Smart Growth, it is important that cities do what they can to level the playing field. Local government strategies run the gamut from reducing parking standards in some areas, preparing a form-based code that allows development by right, identifying and aggregating infill sites, and developing house plans that are pre-approved through the city's design review and building department to hiring a city infill coordinator to help overcome the barriers to building in-town.

The City of Sacramento is planning for two-thirds of their new growth to be infill. For information, contact Dan Parrington, Sacramento City Infill Coordinator, at [dparrington@cityofsacramento.org](mailto:dparrington@cityofsacramento.org) For additional information and resources, contact the California Infill Builders Association at <http://infill-builders.org>.