Downtown Austin Plan

DRAFT FOR COMMUNITY REVIEW

November 2010

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Importance of Downtowns in the 21st Century

I do not know what the future of downtown is, but here is what I am certain of:

- If we are to have an effective environmental policy, downtowns are important.
- If we are to have an effective transportation policy, downtowns are important.
- If we are to have meaningful historic preservation, downtowns are important.
- If we want Smart Growth, downtowns are not only important but also irreplaceable.
- If a local official wants to claim the treasured mantle of fiscal responsibility, downtown revitalization is imperative.
- If we want to avoid Generica, downtown is essential to establish differentiation.
- If the community is trying to compete in economic globalization without being swallowed by cultural globalization, downtown revitalization has to be central to the strategy.
- If new businesses, innovative businesses, and creative businesses are going to be fostered and encouraged, a community will need a downtown where that can take place.
- If we are able to have buildings with meanings, buildings with value, buildings with values, they will be downtown.
- If we are to have public places of public expression, we need a downtown.
- If a community is going to embrace diversity instead of hide from it, celebrate diversity instead of deny it, then that has to take place downtown, it ain't gonna happen anywhere else.

(Donovan Rypkema, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Winter 2003.)

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- A: DAP Transportation Framework Plan
- B: DAP Parks and Open Space Plan
- C: Waller Creek District Master Plan
- D: Northwest District Plan
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Second Street Distric, Austin

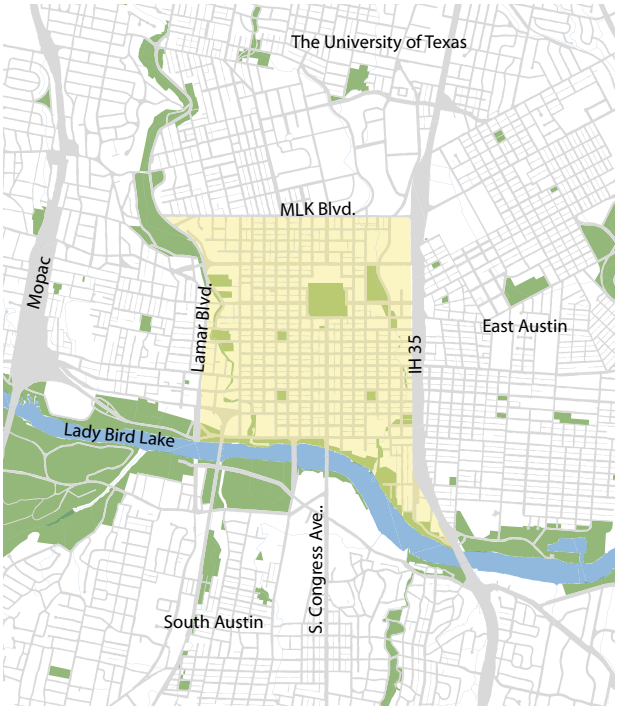
Introduction

Over the past ten years, Downtown Austin has undergone an amazing transformation. 6,000 new residents have moved to Downtown, inhabiting the many new buildings that have dramatically transformed the skyline and energized its streets and public spaces. Downtown is no longer just a place for conducting business or enjoying live music or dining out. It has become a neighborhood in its own right - a place where people are living, working and playing - a place that offers new lifestyle choices - a place that is contributing to a longstanding vision of a mixed-use urban district at the heart of a sustainable region.

In addition to the influx of new residents, considerable progress has been made in other regards. Second Street has emerged as an urban promenade and an exciting day and night-time destination. The cultural life of Austin has been enriched with new institutions, like the Long Center, the Blanton, the Bob Bullock Museum, the MACC, Arthouse and others. The expansion of the Convention Center and the addition of over 1,500 new hotel rooms have strengthened the Downtown's viability as a national and regional destination. And the introduction of commuter rail service represents a significant step toward a more sustainable transportation system.

In spite of - or in some cases because of - this progress, Downtown faces some critical challenges. There is concern over the loss of local businesses and historic buildings, that live music and the arts are being "priced-out" by higher paying activities, that housing is affordable only to the affluent, that parks continue to decline and that Downtown's auto-dominated streets do not support the kind of urban public life that its citizens envision.

The Downtown Austin Plan (DAP) encompasses an approximately 1,000-acre area bounded by Martin Luther King Blvd., IH 35, Lady Bird Lake and Lamar Blvd.



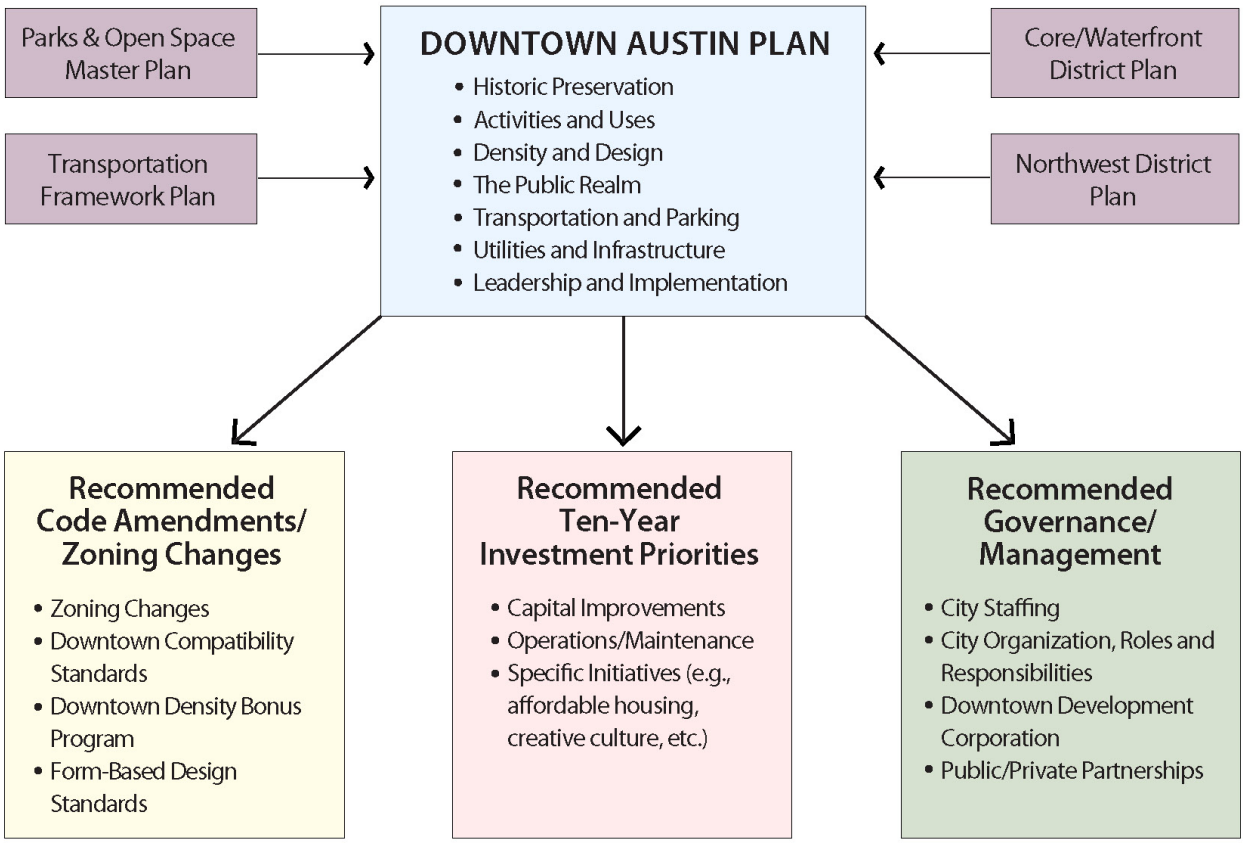
The Downtown Austin Plan (DAP) has provided the opportunity for the community to refine its vision for Downtown and to formulate an action plan that addresses these challenges, while building on the momentum of the past ten years. The DAP is the result of a three-year dialogue with the general public and the Downtown community and stakeholders. It has involved six Town Hall meetings to date, and scores of smaller meetings and workshops, soliciting input on a wide range of issues and geographic subareas.

The planning process began with a nine-month "diagnostic" phase to assess existing conditions, analyze opportunities and constraints, identify priorities and craft the work program for subsequent phases of the project. The resulting "Downtown Austin Plan Issues and Opportunities"[1] report was presented to the community and City Council in February 2008.

In 2008 - 2009, the City Council acted to advance specific elements of the DAP, including a Downtown Transportation Framework Plan and an Urban Rail Study, a Downtown Affordable Housing Strategy, a Downtown Density Bonus Program and a Downtown Parks and Open Space Master Plan. Additional studies include reports on historic preservation, the character and form of the various "districts" or subareas of Downtown, creative community strategies, design and development standards, and a program for upgrading utilities and infrastructure. In addition, District plans for three of the nine districts established by the Plan have been developed, including the Waller Creek District Master Plan, the Core/Waterfront District Plan and the Northwest District Plan.

Over the past ten years Downtown has gone through a remarkable transformation.

The community input involved in assembling these reports and plans have informed and contributed to this, the final draft of the Downtown Austin Plan. The Plan will be adopted as an amendment to the City's Comprehensive Plan. After City Council adoption, City staff will initiate the various recommendations of the Plan. As shown in this chart, implementing the DAP will involve three categories of actions: code amendments and zoning changes, governance and management changes and a commitment to an initial ten-year investment plan.



The DAP is intended as a "living" plan – one that will be amended and updated through time. The document is organized into three parts:

Part I: Executive Summary, highlighting the community's vision for Downtown, the findings of the diagnostic phase and a summary of Plan goals and recommendations.

Part II: Downtown Districts, describing the diverse issues and opportunities of Downtown's sub-areas and stakeholder priorities for the improvement of these areas; and

Part III: The Plan Elements, providing goals and recommendations for the seven elements of the Plan and the implementing actions necessary to achieve them.

Part One:
Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Downtown Austin is everyone's neighborhood. It is the place where people gather for special events and celebrations, the place where we exercise our most basic American freedom of public speech, and the place we come to meet one another - both by plan and by chance. It is a place where we make that vital connection with one another as part of the larger community. Downtown conveys our values and aspirations, both to ourselves and to the outside world. As a place, Downtown is perhaps the most vivid and authentic expression of our history and culture: it is the "soul" of our region, a place like no other.

In recognition of this unique role, the Austin City Council passed a resolution in 2005 calling for the development of a plan to guide the City and the community in achieving a shared vision for Downtown. The resolution recognized the importance of Downtown in reinforcing the City's fundamental goals of economic and environmental sustainability, affordability, livability and diversity. (See Appendix A)

Downtown is the place where we make that vital connection with one another as part of the larger community.

More specifically, the resolution reiterated the goal of 25,000 residents living Downtown in 10 years and therefore, the need to plan for passenger rail; to increase funding for Great Streets, drainage and flood control improvements; to revise and update regulations consistent with more dense urban development and infill; to develop a strategy for affordable workforce housing; and to explore redevelopment of government-owned land.

THE VISION FOR DOWNTOWN

Over a three-year planning process of the Downtown Austin Plan (DAP), a vision has emerged for Downtown Austin. At its Bicentennial in 2039, Downtown will be at the heart of one of the most sustainable cities in the nation with:

- A dense and livable pattern of development that supports a vibrant day and nighttime environment;
- An interconnected pattern of streets, parks and public spaces that instill a unique sense of place and community;
- A multi-modal transportation system that is convenient, sustainable, affordable and a viable alternative to the automobile;
- A beloved fabric of historic places, buildings and landscapes that celebrate the unique journey Austin has taken over the past 200 years;

- A variety of districts and destinations that support the creative expression of its citizenry through art, music, theater, dance and performance;
- A green “necklace” of trails extending from Lady Bird Lake, and along Waller and Shoal Creeks into surrounding neighborhoods;
- A wide range of housing choices for individuals and families with diverse social and economic backgrounds; and
- An array of innovative businesses – small and large - that are attracted to the Downtown by its rich human capital and unique sense of place.

SEVEN TRANSFORMATION STEPS IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS

The DAP proposes seven transformative actions that can help realize the community's vision. These and other recommendations are elaborated in the Leadership and Implementation chapter.

1. **Initiate a new generation of downtown signature parks.** Complete Waller Creek as a linear park between Lady Bird Lake and UT, along with Palm and Waterloo parks to provide a green "necklace" that can support the revitalization of Downtown's east side.

2. **Complete the first phase of urban rail.** Connect Downtown, the Capitol Complex, UT and the East Riverside Corridor. Enhance Congress Avenue -"the Main Street of Texas" - and other urban rail streets to promote transit as a high quality mode of choice.

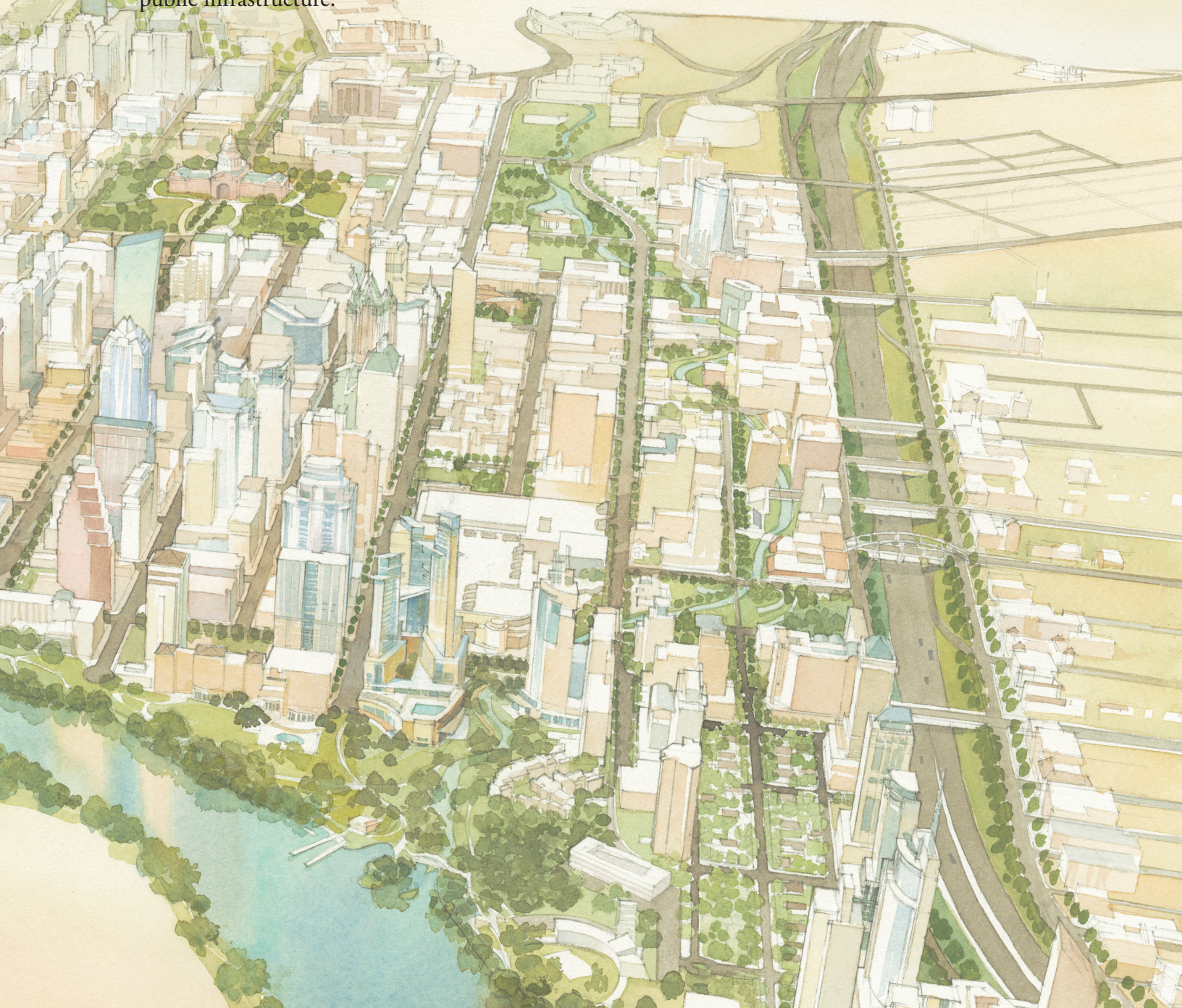
3. **Re-imagine East Sixth Street as a destination for everyone.** Improve the pedestrian environment, diversify activities, protect the unique historic character and provide for coordinated management, so that "Old Pecan Street" can live up to its full potential as one of the most unique streets in Texas.

4. **Provide permanent supportive housing.** Construct and manage safe, secure and affordable long-term housing and services for those who face the complex challenges of homelessness, substances abuse, mental illness or physical disability.

5. **Invest in Downtown infrastructure.** Make utility and drainage improvements that address existing deficiencies and that support positive development in a sustainable way. Establish flexible funds and the leadership that can respond to development opportunities dynamically.

6. **Amend the Land Development Code.** Revise regulations for the downtown area to promote a mix of uses, incentivize well-designed dense development, preserve unique districts and destinations and result in buildings that contribute to a vibrant public realm.

7. **Establish a "Central City Economic Development Corporation".** City government cannot do all this alone. A special entity should be created to leverage actions by both public and private sectors to develop projects that benefit the community, such as affordable housing, parks, cultural facilities and public infrastructure.



WHY IS DOWNTOWN IMPORTANT?

The success of Downtown is tied to the community's larger vision of a city and region that is economically and environmentally sustainable, a vision that is currently being reaffirmed and focused in the *Imagine Austin* update of Austin's Comprehensive Plan.

An Economically-Healthy Downtown Benefits all of Austin's Citizens. We should care about Downtown, because its economic success is central to the prosperity of the city and the region. Taxes generated in Downtown pay for City services well beyond its boundaries: as much as 80% of property taxes generated in Downtown are "exported" to other parts of the City to cover the costs of community services, parks and infrastructure:[2]

- Downtown's land area is 0.6% of the total land area of the City, yet it generates over 5% of the City's property tax, about 3.4 billion dollars annually. An area eight times the size of Downtown is needed to generate the same average taxable value.[3]

Taxes generated Downtown pay for City services well beyond its boundaries.

- The per capita cost of building infrastructure in Downtown is considerably less than that of a typical area outside Downtown. To serve an equivalent population of employees and residents in the outlying parts of Austin, we need more land, more miles of streets, water lines and sewers, more parks, more schools, more police stations, more fire stations, etc.

- The cost of providing public services to each new Downtown resident and worker is much less than the cost of serving new residents and employees in less central locations, since the initial infrastructure investment has already been made.

- Downtown is also the focus of live music and culture which city-wide, contributes more than $2.2 billion annually to the economy, forging Austin's identity and reputation as one of the nation's most vibrant creative-class cities.[4]

- An economically-healthy Downtown is one of the main criteria for how future employers and employees decide whether to invest in our community. Even if they plan to locate in another part of Austin, the vitality and attractiveness of Downtown is a critical factor in choosing Austin as a place for their business and home.

Downtown is Key to the Region's Environmental Sustainability Goals. A compact and dense downtown is a model of sustainability. In addition to being less costly and more efficient to provide services, Downtown has a much smaller carbon footprint than outlying neighborhoods of Austin. Its continued growth and success is key to the community's goals for climate protection and environmental sustainability:

- Development in Downtown is much less land-consumptive than that in the outlying parts of the City, and a compact downtown helps to reduce suburban sprawl that is overtaking the countryside and our environmentally-sensitive lands of the "Drinking Water Protection Zone";

- With a more compact land area than suburban neighborhoods, Downtown needs many fewer roads and sidewalks to support the same number of people, and is therefore helping to reduce: the amount of impervious surface area that brings contaminated stormwater into our creeks and rivers; the number of "vehicle miles traveled" (VMT) that leads directly to the deterioration of air quality; and the acres of pavement and asphalt that create "heat islands".

- By comparing a "green" urban development of 200 residential units to a typical suburban single-family project with the same number of units, the benefits of the urban development become readily apparent:[5]

  - The typical urban project uses less than 3/4 of an acre of land, while the suburban project consumes as much as 70 acres.

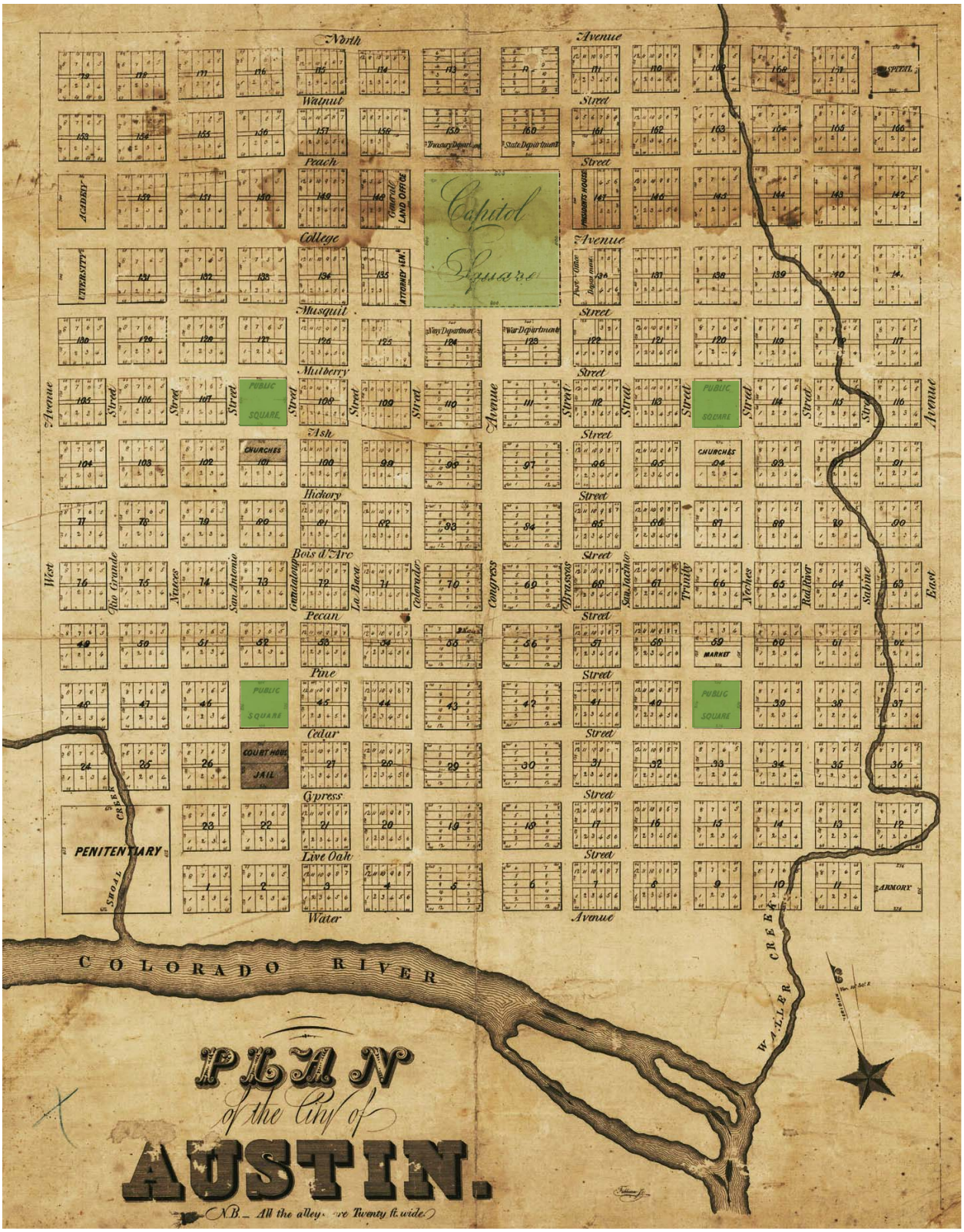
  - Impervious cover of the suburban project is thirty times as great (26 to 32 acres compared with 3/4 acres).

  - Landscape water usage for the suburban project can be as much as 15.6 million gallons per year, compared with little or no consumption for the urban project.

  - Monthly electricity usage for the suburban project is five to ten times greater than the urban development (i.e., $100 to $300/unit versus $10 to $60/unit).

  - The taxable value of the "green" urban project is considerably greater than its suburban counterpart ($80 to $150 million/acre depending on the unit value, compared with $700,000 to $1.2 million/acre, assuming an average home value of $200,000).

Development in Downtown is much less energy, water and land-consumptive than that in outlying areas.



1839 Waller Plan of the City Austin

DOWNTOWN YESTERDAY

Downtown Austin is the original city of Austin. The shape and form of Downtown dates from 1839, when Edwin Waller laid out the simple grid plan of the original city with its four public squares and Capitol square. The Capitol Building would be constructed at the head of Congress Avenue to serve as a focal point for the city from the Colorado River. The buildings in Downtown represent all of the periods of Austin history and development, including the fine Greek Revival homes designed by architect-builder Abner Cook in the 1850s, the masonry commercial buildings of the Victorian era, the Chicago Style skyscrapers of the early 20th century, and the striking architectural landmarks of today, such as Austin's City Hall.

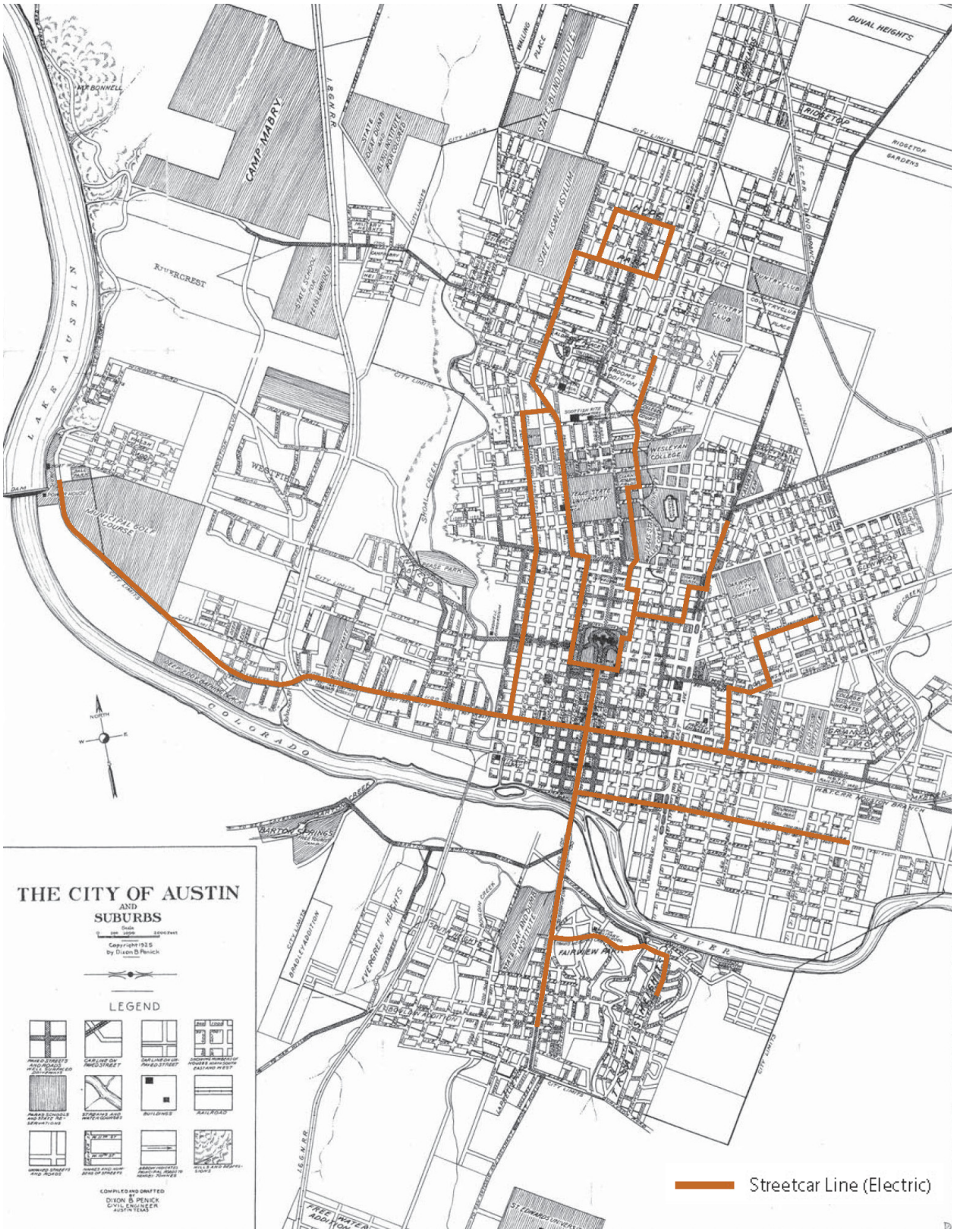
In order to fully appreciate the context within which we find ourselves, it is important to understand the forces that have shaped the city. Seven transformative events, not all of them positive, have given Downtown the form and character that we experience today. These include:

- The 1839 Waller Plan (left), which has established a lasting imprint and the basic "DNA" of the city: its block sizes, street grid and public open spaces;

- The introduction of passenger rail in 1871, including an urban streetcar system that led to Austin's first neighborhoods beyond Downtown: Travis Heights and Hyde Park. The streetcar system, with its 23 miles of lines converging on Congress Avenue, was abandoned in the 1940s for buses and automobiles, but provides a model for a new generation of transit service that is being contemplated today.

- The damming of the Colorado River in 1893, which removed the recurring threat of flooding and ultimately led to the creation of a necklace of recreational "lakes" and to the beautification of Lady Bird Lake - the "jewel" of Austin's park system. Lady Bird Lake has served as Downtown's principal amenity and one of the most powerful catalysts for new residential and commercial investment.

The introduction of urban rail in 1871 (left) and the damming of the Colorado River in 1893 (right) were formative events in the City's history.



1925 Austin Streetcar Map

- The City Plan of 1928 was the City's first formalized attempt to guide growth and public investment, establishing zoning and a parks and recreation department. However, on the negative side, the Plan promoted race segregation of neighborhoods and districts, creating divisions and inequities that still exist today.

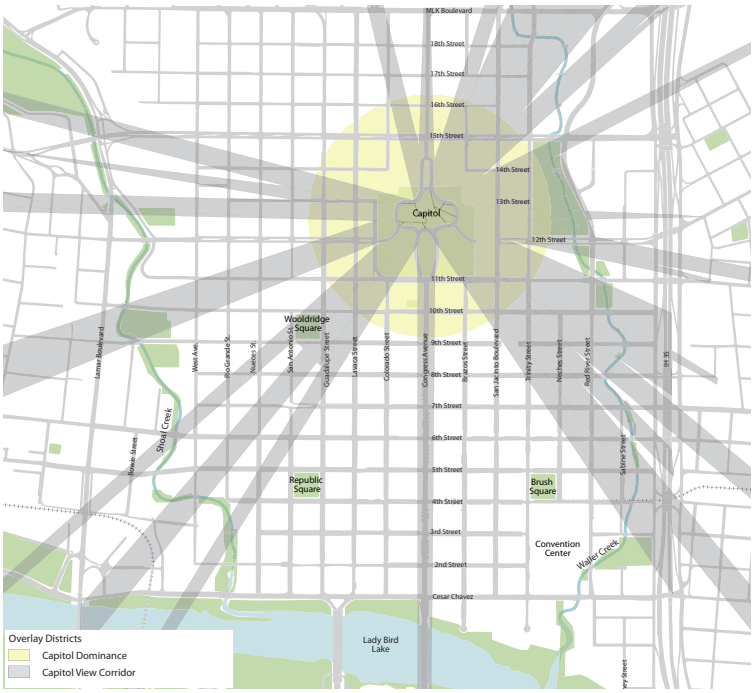
IH 35, completed in the 1970s, created a significant barrier between Downtown and East Austin.

- The construction of the Interstate Highway system of IH 35, cutting through the urban core in the 1960s contributed to the economic development of the city and the nation, but tore the fabric of the eastern edge of Downtown, creating economic barriers and racial divisions with East Austin. The visual and physical effect of the elevated freeway is still strongly felt.

- Shortly after the highway was constructed, urban renewal swept the northern and eastern quadrants of Downtown, where the State and UT considerably expanded their holdings, removing single-family neighborhoods. Single institutional uses, such as the Federal Courthouse and State office buildings and their parking garages followed along with university facilities. While many of these uses are positive, the lack of residential and commercial uses nearby or within, has left this large part of Downtown with little vitality.

- The 1984 Capitol View Corridor Legislation has been highly effective in preserving key public views to the Capitol building and dome, and in doing so, the image and identity of Austin as the capital city of Texas. Responding to community concerns that new high-rise development was beginning to overshadow and obstruct views to the Capitol, the City and State adopted several ordinances and legislation: a Congress Avenue Overlay District, requiring stepbacks for buildings along the central avenue, a Capitol Dominance Zone limiting building height within a certain radius of the Capitol, and the Capitol View Corridors (CVCs), protecting 35 different viewpoints to the Capitol through specific height limits. These ordinances are playing a significant role in shaping the form of the Downtown skyline.

The 1984 Capitol View Corridor legislation has been effective in preserving views to this historic resource.



DOWNTOWN TODAY

The Good News: Downtown is evolving as a great place to live, work and play. Over the past 10 years, considerable progress has been made toward the realization of some of the community's aspirations for Downtown:

- **People want to live Downtown**. More than 6,000 new residents have moved into new condominiums, apartments and townhouses - a remarkable growth rate of 40% since 2000.[6]
- **There is a greater diversity of land uses.** Over 400,000 square feet of new retail shops, nightclubs and restaurants have opened to serve residents, visitors and employees, bringing more life to the streets. Concentrations of restaurants and shops in the 2nd Street District and around the Whole Foods World Headquarters in the Market District have strengthened Downtown as a regional destination.
- **Job growth has been robust.** Over 6,000 new jobs have been created in Downtown, with an addition of 1.7 million square feet of new office space.[7]
- **Visitors continue to view Downtown Austin as an attractive destination.** Over the past 10 years, more than 1,500 hotel rooms have been constructed Downtown[8] ; occupancy and rental rates are the highest in the region, and more than seven million people visit annually, contributing over $2.8 billion to the economy.[9]

Downtown is re-emerging as a place to live, shop and play, as well as work.

- **There is a clustering of cultural venues** (museums, theaters, galleries, live music clubs, etc.) that provide destinations for residents and visitors.
- **The pedestrian environment is improving.** With the initiation and implementation of the Great Streets Program, 70 blockfaces of tree-lined sidewalks have been created in the past 10 years.
- **Bicyclists are safer and more welcome,** with the construction of the Lance Armstrong Bikeway and over 15 miles of new bike facilities within, and leading to, Downtown.
- **Rail transit has arrived,** with Capital Metro's 32-mile commuter rail service ("MetroRail") between Leander and Downtown. Lone Star Rail between San Antonio and Austin is in the planning stage, and the City is evaluating plans for a 16.5-mile urban rail system that will extend the reach of the commuter rail to many central Austin destinations.
- **Flood control improvements for Waller Creek are now underway,** which will remove 28 acres of Downtown real estate from the floodplain, create a new open space resource for the community and set the stage for positive redevelopment.
- **There is still significant potential for growth.** There are approximately 100 acres of assembled vacant or underutilized property of a quarter-block area or greater in Downtown poised for redevelopment. Given existing entitlements, this could more than double the size of Downtown, from approximately 26 million square feet to more than 60 million square feet of floor area.[10]

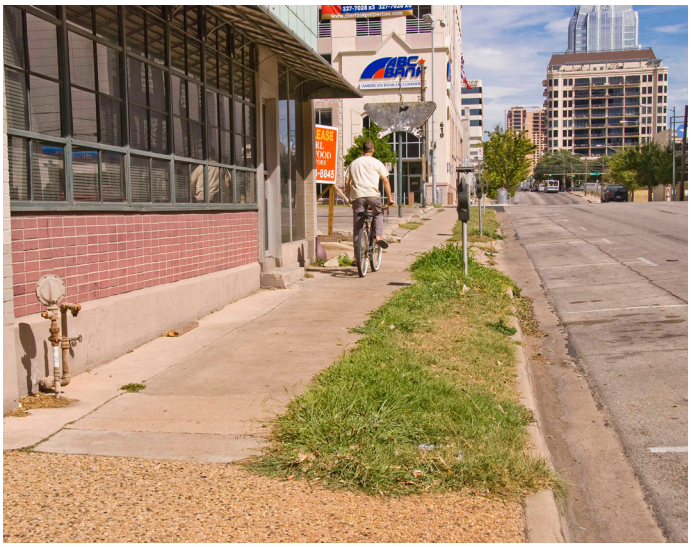
Commuter rail service has been initiated and the pedestrian environment is improving.

WHAT IS AT RISK?

In spite of this progress, Downtown faces significant challenges and risks:

- **The automobile still dominates.** Lack of mobility options continue to threaten both the economic and environmental well-being of Downtown, as well as its visual attractiveness and quality of life. Since there are few effective options for increasing the capacity of the vehicular network leading to and within Downtown, continued growth is dependent upon a significant investment in transit and other alternatives to the automobile. That investment has yet to be made.
- **The quality of streets and parks is lacking.** The "public realm", the system of publicly-used streets and open spaces which make up 50% of Downtown's land area, is in deteriorating condition. Most streets are still uncomfortable places for people to walk or linger. Due to limited funding, Downtown parks are poorly maintained and are often occupied by the homeless, making them uncomfortable for others to enjoy. Significant public and private investment is critical to enhance the quality of life in Downtown, and its appeal as a place to live, work, play and visit.
- **There is a lack of support services for the homeless and very low-income populations.** There are an estimated 3,500 homeless individuals in Austin at any one time, and about 900 of these are chronically-homeless. Despite the needs for transitional and permanent supportive housing, there are no permenant supportive housing units in Downtown.[11]
- **Some local and "iconic" businesses are being priced out.** Some longtime businesses, that have given Austin and its downtown an authentic charm and a level of affordability, have been forced out by new development and rising rent levels. There is concern that Downtown could become a place dominated by national chains.

The automobile is still the dominant mode of transportation in Downtown. Many streets are uncomfortable places to walk or linger.



- **Downtown's role as the region's center of live music is in danger of being displaced by redevelopment.** Venerated music destinations along Red River Street are at risk of being displaced by new development along Waller Creek. East 6th Street no longer lives up to its identity as a live music district, and the increasing number of Downtown residents has created new issues of compatibility.

- **Downtown's historic fabric is at risk of being demolished.** More than 150 potentially significant historic properties, identified in Austin's 1984 Cultural Resources Survey, have been demolished in Downtown over the past 35 years. Some distinctive areas of Downtown – like the Warehouse District – have no protections and are in danger of being lost to redevelopment.

- **Development sites are becoming more constrained.** With fewer half and full-block building sites remaining, new development projects will need to be more efficient with parking and more cognizant of their relationship with adjacent buildings. More specific form-based regulations, with increased levels of transit and shared parking, will be needed to achieve the full potential of a high-density downtown that is livable.

- **The development of Downtown is only beginning to mature.** Compared to other cities in the south and west, Austin's downtown is in its infancy. Although it has grown substantially in the last decade, Downtown Austin remains in the lowest third of southern and western cities in terms of population density per square mile and land prices remain substantially lower than other cities.

- **Downtown's share of the regional office and employment market has declined** to less than 20% of the region's supply. Downtown is no longer the principal employment center of the region, and it has not been the location of choice for the primary tenant drivers of the office market, such as technology companies.[12]

Unique areas of Downtown including the Warehouse District (left) and the Red River Music District (right) are at risk of being displaced.

THE SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THE DOWNTOWN AUSTIN PLAN

The Downtown Austin Plan (DAP) encompasses an approximately 1,000-acre area bounded by MLK Boulevard on the north, IH 35 on the east, Lady Bird Lake on the south and Lamar Boulevard on the west. The DAP is a policy document aimed at addressing the above opportunities and challenges. Like the many neighborhood plans, it will be adopted as an amendment to the City's Comprehensive Plan. Subsequent to City Council's adoption of the DAP, implementation of the various recommendations of the plan will be initiated, such as adoption of new policies, budget and staffing allocations, re-zonings, code amendments, process improvements, etc. The DAP will be a "living" plan – to be amended through time with the approval of the Planning Commission and City Council.

The DAP process has included six Town Hall Meetings and over 80 smaller focus group meetings on a variety of topics.

While the planning horizon for the DAP is over the next 25 years, the Plan includes a shorter-term implementation program that focuses on actions to be taken in the next 10 years: 2012 to 2021. The Plan provides a foundation for more specific initiatives (e.g., Downtown density bonuses, affordable housing policies, creative community policies, historic preservation programs, form-based development standards, etc.), as well as more detailed district plans for the defined sub-areas of Downtown. The district plans provide specific policy guidance for the nine defined character districts of Downtown (see Part Two: Downtown Districts).

The Planning Process

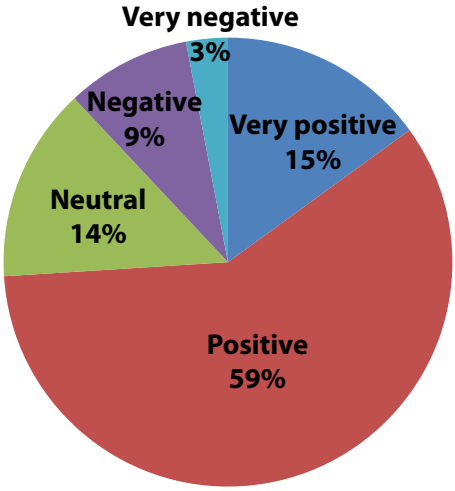
The DAP is the product of a three-year dialogue with the general public and Downtown community and stakeholders. It has involved six Town Hall meetings and scores of smaller meetings and workshops, soliciting input on a wide range of issues. (See Appendix B which describes the meetings held and the people involved.)

The DAP has been guided by senior City staff, by Downtown stakeholders and by the City's Downtown Commission, whose members represent other key boards and commissions.[13] The planning process began with a nine-month "diagnostic" phase to assess existing conditions, analyze opportunities and constraints, identify priorities and craft the most relevant work program or scope for the second phase. It concluded with the "Issues and Opportunities" report to the City Council in February 2008.

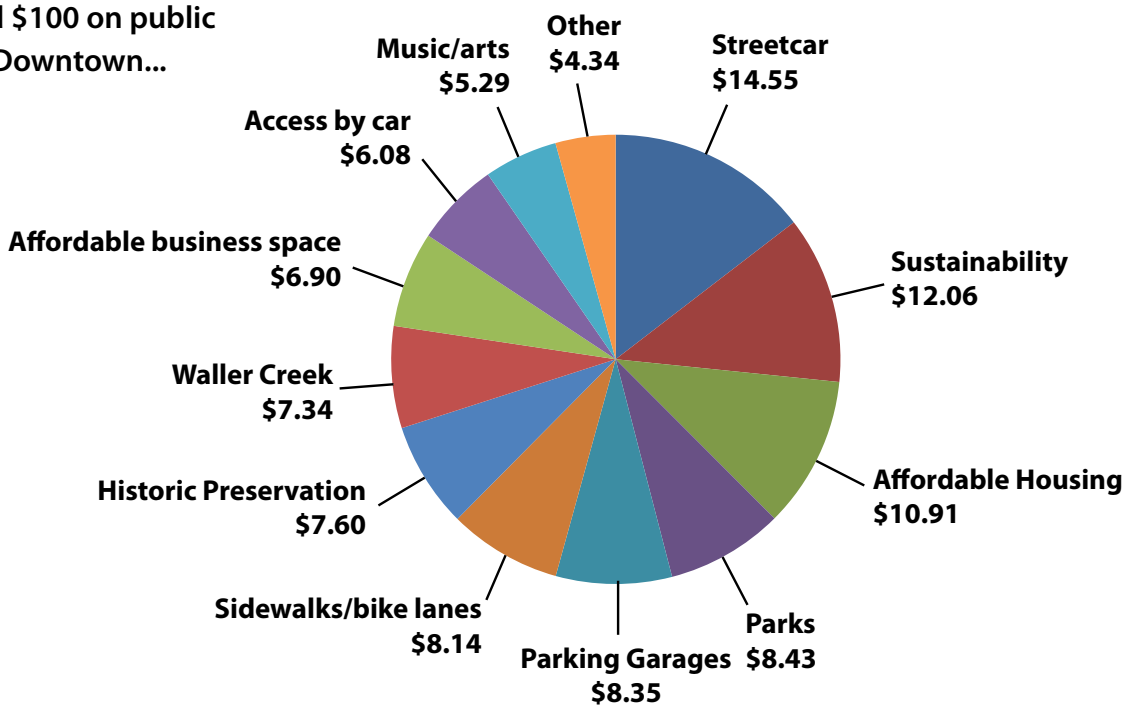
The planning process has involved many separate planning studies, all of which have informed the policies of this, overall Downtown Austin Plan. In March 2008, the City Council acted to advance specific elements of the DAP, including: a Downtown Transportation Framework Plan and an Urban Rail Study, which has provided the basis for current transportation and rail transit planning by the City; a Downtown Affordable Housing Strategy to provide policy direction and to optimize public investment toward a more affordable and diverse Downtown; and a Downtown Density Bonus Program to provide an equitable and transparent system of awarding additional density. These reports were finalized in 2009, and with additional public input, have been incorporated into the policies of this Plan.[14]

A survey completed by over 3,500 respondents asked community members to express their feelings about Downtown.

All things considered, I feel ____ about Downtown Austin.

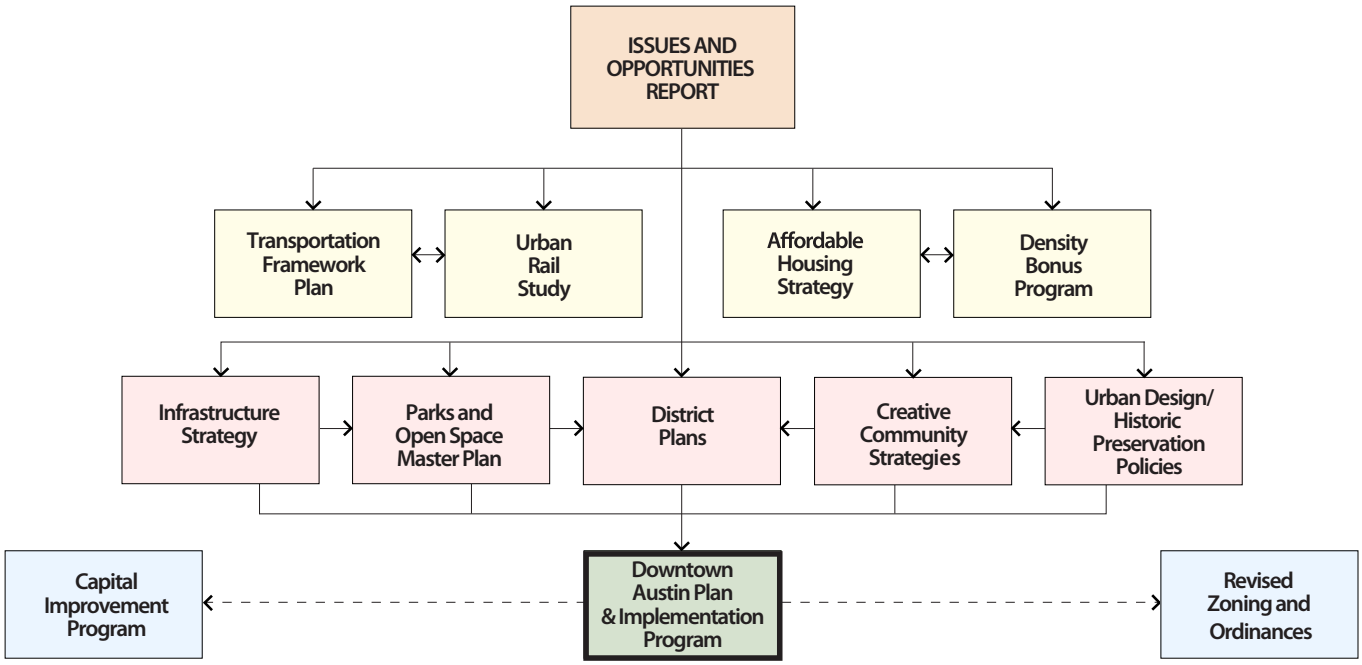


If I had to spend $100 on public improvements Downtown...



Over the past year, the planning process has produced additional separate studies and reports on historic preservation, the creative community, form-based development standards, and utilities and infrastructure. The Downtown Parks and Open Space Master Plan was completed in January 2010 and endorsed by the Parks and Recreation Board in May 2010. In addition, individual district "spreads" were created that capture the essential character-defining elements of each district, along with their key goals and priorities.[15]

Three "district plans" have been completed, beneath the umbrella of the Downtown Austin Plan, including the Waller Creek District Plan, the Core/Waterfront District Plan and the Northwest District Plan. Each involved extensive stakeholder and community input to establish policy direction and development standards for these particular areas of Downtown. The Waller Creek District Master Plan was adopted by City Council in June 2010, and the other two draft district plans have been incorporated within the DAP.[16]



Organizational Chart of DAP Elements

The Planning Context

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the community has engaged in a dialogue to understand where Downtown Austin has been, and to better shape where it is going. Some of the key guiding plans and documents include several R/UDAT (Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team) analyses and recommendations developed for Downtown, which led to the creation of the Downtown Austin Alliance.

Further, the Design Commission's 2000 Downtown Austin Design Guidelines and its sequel, the 2009 Urban Design Guidelines provide important perspective and guidance on how both public and private sector development should promote Downtown as a dense, compact and sustainable place.[17]

The City's former Smart Growth Program and ongoing Great Streets Development Program also have contributed to the place-making of Downtown, creating incentives for the private sector to build toward a shared vision of a great downtown.

The Envision Central Texas (ECT) plan, completed in May 2004, sets forth a far-sighted vision for our five-county area, emphasizing the importance of the Downtown as a dense, walkable, mixed-use district at the heart of a multi-centered region served by transit.[18]

An intensive community-based planning process is now underway to update the City's Comprehensive Plan. Known as "Imagine Austin"[19], the process is building on the work of the ECT Plan to set a policy framework for future conservation, growth and investment. (See Appendix C for Imagine Austin Vision Statement.)

Parallel and in concert with this effort and with the Downtown Austin Plan are several transportation initiatives, including the City's Strategic Mobility Plan and Urban Rail Program[20] which define a long term plan and near-term strategies for implementation. The policies and recommendations of the Downtown Austin Plan build on and reinforce this planning context, toward the vision of an economically and environmentally sustainable region.

The Envision Central Texas Plan emphasizes the importance of Downtown as the heart of a multi-centered region.

SUMMARY OF GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Downtown Austin Plan is written as an action-oriented document to assist City government, its staff and leadership, and its potential partners in implementing the DAP. For this reason, the recommendations are organized into seven subject areas that relate closely to those City departments, divisions and programs that will undertake their implementation. These elements are:

- Historic Preservation (HP)
- Activities and Uses (AU)
- Density and Design (DD)
- The Public Realm (PR)
- Transportation and Parking (TP)
- Utilities and Infrastructure (UI)
- Leadership and Implementation (LI)

The handbook-style format and the succinct language of the Plan are meant to facilitate action. Each of the seven elements has an over-arching goal or broad intent, followed by a series of specific recommendations formulated as objectives, with sufficient explanation to convey key considerations for final implementation. The spectrum of recommendations include actions regarding the City's and its partners' policies, staffing, programs, process improvements and physical improvement projects.

Approximately 100 recommendations have been developed throughout the DAP planning process described above, and are the result of balancing stakeholder concerns and preferences with best professional planning practices. Some recommendations are actionable immediately, others will require further study and stakeholder input as they are refined and readied for final action. For example, Council adoption of the DAP could initiate the staff action necessary to finalize code amendments and zoning changes and ready them for a series of individual public hearings and adoptions.

The following provides a summary of the Plan's goals and recommendations and serves as a snapshot of the overall Downtown Austin Plan. The full description of these recommendations can be found in Part Three: The Plan Elements.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Preserve and enhance the unique historical and cultural heritage of Downtown.

HP-1. PRESERVATION PLAN

HP-1.1: Update and disseminate the updated Comprehensive Cultural Resources Survey and Preservation Plan, beginning with Downtown, and plan for periodic updates.

HP-2. DESIGN STANDARDS

HP-2.1: Adopt form-based development standards to protect and complement the unique character of historic downtown buildings, streets, and districts.

HP-2.2: Adopt standards and incentives to protect the Warehouse District.

HP-2.3: Introduce stepback provisions and other design standards for building additions within the East 6th Street National Register District.

HP-2.4: Introduce stepback provisions for new buildings and building additions within the Congress Avenue National Register District.

HP-3. ADMINISTRATION

HP-3.1: Improve the capacity of the City's Historic Preservation Office (CHPO) and that of the Historic Landmark Commission.

HP-3.2: Create a historic preservation funding source and incentives to encourage preservation projects available to both public and private property owners, as well as tenants.

ACTIVITIES AND USES

Ensure that Downtown's future growth supports a vibrant, diverse and pedestrian-friendly urban district.

AU-1. MIXED USE

- **AU-1.1:** Replace single-use zoning districts with downtown mixed-use zoning designations.
- **AU-1.2:** Prioritize or incentivize certain uses in certain districts of Downtown.
- **AU-1.3:** Prioritize and incentivize certain ground-level uses along certain streets.
- **AU-1.4:** Change Cocktail Lounge from a permitted use to a conditional use.

AU-2. HOUSING

- **AU-2.1:** Support the production of affordable housing.
- **AU-2.2:** Leverage redevelopment of public lands to contribute to affordable housing production.
- **AU-2.3:** Provide for permanent supportive housing.
- **AU-2.4:** Promote affordable housing for artists and musicians.
- **AU-2.5:** Make downtown housing more family-friendly.

AU-3. RETAIL AND ENTERTAINMENT

- **AU-3.1:** Reinforce existing retail and entertainment districts.
- **AU-3.2:** Promote ground-level retail and restaurant uses along particular Downtown streets.
- **AU-3.3:** Establish retail, entertainment and cultural uses in City-sponsored redevelopment projects.

AU-4. LIVE MUSIC, CULTURAL, AND CREATIVE USES

- **AU-4.1:** Encourage Downtown museums and other cultural institutions that serve the entire city.
- **AU-4.2:** Provide for the creation of new cultural facilities and live music venues.
- **AU-4.3:** Support cultural district planning and marketing of Downtown arts and cultural organizations.
- **AU-4.4:** Provide incentives and programs for the protection of the Red River Street music district.
- **AU-4.5:** Build on the East 6th Street brand and improve it as a high-quality destination.
- **AU-4.6:** Allow restaurants in certain downtown districts to have outdoor music venues with the same sound levels as cocktail lounges.
- **AU-4.7:** Increase the capacity of the City staff to act as an advocate for the creative community.

AU-5. OFFICE AND EMPLOYMENT USES

- **AU-5.1:** Provide incentives for Downtown office and employment uses.

AU-6. HOTEL AND VISITOR USES

- **AU-6.1:** Provide incentives for Downtown hotel uses.
- **AU-6.2:** Support the development of an additional "headquarter" hotel in close proximity to the Convention Center.

AU-7. PUBLIC SERVICES

- **AU-7.1:** Enhance and expand the range of downtown social services in a manner that is compatible with other land uses and the public realm.
- **AU-7.2:** Promote educational and child care facilities that make the Downtown more family-friendly.
- **AU-7.3:** Improve fire and police facilities.

DENSITY AND DESIGN

Ensure that Downtown can evolve into a compact and dense urban district, with new buildings contributing positively to sustainability, quality of life and the Downtown experience.

DD-1. HEIGHT AND DENSITY

- **DD-1.1:** Maintain existing height and density limits as a baseline with some adjustments based on the surrounding context.
- **DD-1.2:** Finalize and adopt a Downtown Density Bonus Program that allows developers and the community to equitably share the benefits of additional height and density above the existing regulations.
- **DD-1.3:** Employ additional density incentives to achieve specific community objectives.
- **DD-1.4:** Establish specific scale-compatibility standards that are tailored to the downtown context.

DD-2. STREETFRONT RELATIONSHIPS

- **DD-2.1:** Require setbacks and build-to lines that are appropriate to the form and character of the street.
- **DD-2.2:** Allow additional setbacks if these provide publicly-accessible open space.
- **DD-2.3:** Limit curb cuts, drop-offs and porte-cocheres that interrupt the continuity of the pedestrian path and experience.
- **DD-2.4:** Establish standards for the treatment of commercial building fronts.
- **DD-2.5:** Establish standards for the treatment of new residential building fronts.

DD-3. BUILDING DESIGN

- **DD-3.1:** Promote a compatible relationship between new and historic buildings.
- **DD-3.2:** Create buildings that provide spatial definition of streets.
- **DD-3.3:** Step towers back from the streets.
- **DD-3.4:** Provide space between towers.
- **DD-3.5:** Encourage tall and slender towers.
- **DD-3.6:** Prohibit highly-reflective glass cladding on buildings.
- **DD-3.7:** Integrate parking garages into the architecture of a building.
- **DD-3.8:** Establish a higher standard of green building consistent with overall city goals to be established in the updated Comprehensive Plan.

THE PUBLIC REALM

Interconnect and enhance Downtown's network of public parks, open spaces and streets.

PR-1. PUBLIC PARKS

- **PR-1.1:** Provide adequate funding for the maintenance and operation of all City-controlled Downtown parks.
- **PR-1.2:** Program and design parks to serve the diverse needs of Downtown residents, families, workers and visitors.
- **PR-1.3:** Improve Downtown's urban greenways and adjoining public parks as natural refuges and pathways.
- **PR-1.4:** Improve the historic squares of the original City Plan.
- **PR-1.5:** Improve the PARD-owned Old Bakery and Emporium and surrounding parkland on Congress Avenue.
- **PR-1.6:** Pursue public/private funding sources and management structures for improving and maintaining Downtown parks.
- **PR-1.7:** Special entities, such as non-profit conservancies, should be encouraged to assist with park improvements, operations, management and maintenance.
- **PR-1.8:** Allocate additional sources of public funding to Downtown parks.

PR-2. OPEN SPACE

- **PR-2.1:** Provide incentives and design criteria that promote high quality open space within private developments.

PR-3. STREETSCAPES

- **PR-3.1:** Maintain, extend and restore Downtown's grid system of streets and alleys.
- **PR-3.2:** Require all new development to build Great Streets sidewalks or contribute to the Great Streets Development Program fund.
- **PR-3.3:** Streamline the license agreement process for Great Streets improvements.
- **PR-3.4:** Ensure that planned transit facilities, including urban rail, incorporate Great Streets improvements.
- **PR-3.5:** Improve East 6th Street as a mixed-use, pedestrian-priority, entertainment street that appeals to a greater diversity of people.
- **PR-3.6:** Improve Congress Avenue in keeping with its role as the Main Street of Texas.
- **PR-3.7:** Improve Sabine Street, from 3rd to 7th Street as a bicycle-friendly, pedestrian promenade, paralleling Waller Creek.
- **PR-3.8:** Establish a public restroom program in Downtown.

TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING

Develop a multi-modal transportation system that improves access to and mobility within the Downtown.

TP-1. STREETS

- **TP-1.1:** Improve pedestrian facilities in all streets and implement the Great Streets Master Plan.
- **TP-1.2:** Convert certain Downtown streets to two-way operation.
- **TP-1.3:** Maintain alleys as the principal means of loading, servicing and parking access.
- **TP-1.4:** Reduce or remove the barrier of the IH 35 edge.
- **TP-1.5:** Establish a comprehensive way-finding system for all modes of transportation.

TP-2. TRANSIT

- **TP-2.1:** Establish an urban rail system to connect Downtown with other Central Austin destinations and the existing and planned commuter rail system.
- **TP-2.2:** Concentrate major bus routes along designated Downtown corridors.
- **TP-2.3:** Create high-quality, state-of-the-art transit stops and transfer areas.

TP-3. BICYCLES

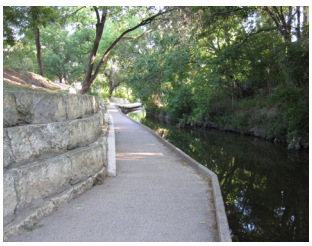
- **TP-3.1:** Establish bicycle priority streets that provide facilities for all levels of bicyclists along key north-south and east-west corridors.
- **TP-3.2:** Introduce shared lane markings ("sharrows") on streets where cyclists can safely share the lane with automobiles.
- **TP-3.3:** Create a more continuous system of off-street bikeways and multi-use trails.
- **TP-3.4:** Increase bicycle parking in Downtown.
- **TP-3.5:** Require shower and locker facilities in office developments.
- **TP-3.6:** Introduce bike-sharing.
- **TP-3.7:** Ensure that urban rail facilities promote bike safety.

TP-4. PARKING

- **TP-4.1:** Manage and coordinate Downtown parking.
- **TP-4.2:** Promote public/private partnerships to provide shared parking facilities within new development.
- **TP-4.3:** Establish an in-lieu fee system that allows developers to contribute to centralized off-site parking as an alternative to providing parking on site.
- **TP-4.4:** Provide incentives for on-site, car-share spaces and recharging facilities.
- **TP-4.5:** Manage on-street parking and loading areas in a more efficient manner.
- **TP-4.6:** Create a way-finding system and real-time parking displays that guide visitors to key public parking facilities.

TP-5. TRANSPORTATION DEMAND MANAGEMENT

- **TP-5.1:** Assist in establishing a Central City Transportation Management Association.



UTILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Provide for phased utility and infrastructure upgrades that address existing deficiencies and that support future redevelopment.

UI-1. COORDINATION AND PRIORITIZATION

UI-1.1: Consolidate utility coordination efforts under executive-level leadership to coordinate and facilitate the planning and construction of proposed utility and roadway-related infrastructure projects.

UI-1.2: Expand and refine the City's use of the *Envista* system.

UI-2. WATER/WASTEWATER

UI-2.1: Dedicate adequate funding annually to Austin Water Utility's (AWU) "CIP-dedicated funds".

UI-2.2: Require developers to submit their Service Extension Requests (SERs) for proposed projects in advance of their site development permit applications to allow time for AWU to assess needs and, if applicable, develop cost-participation agreements.

UI-3. WATERSHED PROTECTION

UI-3.1: Develop a Downtown Drainage Master Plan and extend that plan to adjacent urban redevelopment areas as feasible.

UI-3.2: Continue to allocate funding annually to departmental "CIP-dedicated funds" for use in upgrading City storm sewer mains through developer participation programs or for CIP projects, on an as-needed basis.

UI-3.3: Increase watershed maintenance of Shoal and Waller creeks.

UI-3.4: Construct the Little Shoal Creek flood control project.

UI-3.5: Implement the Lower Shoal Creek Restoration Project.

UI-3.6: Develop a flood control plan for Shoal Creek in conjunction with a Shoal Creek Greenway improvement plan.

UI-3.7: Create a Water Quality Program for Downtown.

UI-4. ELECTRIC UTILITY

UI-4.1: Acquire a site for a future electric substation.

UI-4.2: Austin Energy should develop design and location options for underground electric vaults to better achieve goals for pedestrian-oriented, ground-floor uses and facades.

UI-5. DRY UTILITY

UI-5.1: Require that "dry" utility franchises go through a City review process to receive approval for alignments and/or relocations.

UI-6. ROADWAY

UI-6.1: Continue to prioritize maintenance improvements to Downtown streets and alleys, and coordinate and fund "complete" street reconstruction.

LEADERSHIP AND IMPLEMENTATION

Implement the Downtown Austin Plan, within the resources and priorities of the community.

LI-1. GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATION

- **LI-1.1:** Establish a Central City Economic Development Corporation.
- **LI-1.2:** Encourage and support public/private partnerships and conservancies aimed at building and operating parks and open space improvements.
- **LI-1.3:** Organize City government to provide for the effective implementation of the Downtown Austin Plan.

LI-2. REGULATORY AMENDMENTS

- **LI-2.1:** Adopt the Downtown Austin Plan as an amendment to the City's Comprehensive Plan.
- **LI-2.2:** Finalize and adopt a Downtown Density Bonus Program by ordinance. (See Appendix H.)
- **LI-2.3:** Refine the recommended form-based development standards as part of the ordinance preparation and amendment process. (See Appendix I.)
- **LI-2.4:** Amend the zoning ordinance within the Land Development Code in a phased way that allows for further stakeholder involvement and refinement, as appropriate.
- **LI-2.5:** Make amendments to other plans, as appropriate.

LI-3. DOWNTOWN INVESTMENT AND ACTION PLAN

- **LI-3.1:** Adopt a ten-year action plan for implementation.
- **LI-3.2:** Upon adoption of a finalized Implementation Program, EGRSO should lead City departments in the development of a financing plan for these priority actions.