



COUNCIL COMMITTEE REPORT

COMMITTEE ON OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Date: October 26, 2016

Agenda Item #: 4

Agenda Item: Briefing with discussion on green infrastructure and sustainable water management policy issues in the Natural and Built Environment Code Prescription and the Code Advisory Working Group report in response to the prescription identified as impacting the Land Development Code, including but not limited to watersheds and creeks; green streets; parks, public open space, and urban trails; compatibility and green transitions; and stormwater quantity and quality.

Vote No vote was taken.

Sponsors/Department: Planning and Zoning, CodeNEXT Citizen Advisory Group

Presenters: Jennifer Todd, Senior Planner, Planning and Zoning, Eleanor McKinney, CodeNEXT Code Advisory Group, and Lauren Ice, CodeNEXT Code Advisory Group

Summary of Discussion

- Jennifer Todd, Senior Planner with Planning and Zoning, gave some background on CodeNEXT and the Natural and Built Environment Prescription Paper. CodeNEXT came about as the implementation of one of the priority programs of Imagine Austin—the rewrite of the Land Development Code. This rewrite is seen as a critical component of achieving the other Imagine Austin goals.
- The Prescription Paper topics were largely pulled from the top ten issues identified in the land development code diagnosis, as well as frequent questions and concerns from the public. The main goal was to help frame a discussion of the complex topics and tradeoffs before the draft code debuts in January of 2017. The Natural and Built Environment prescription was released in March, followed by prescriptions on household affordability, mobility, and fiscal health. Each prescription starts with looking at where the city is now and the desired outcome with regard to a current topic. The goals are derived from Imagine Austin, as well as from established policy. The prescriptions give solutions to how we can potentially bridge gaps between current and desired outcomes.
- One of the main citizen feedback tools is the Code Advisory Group, which is an 18-member group appointed by Council. They have had over 40 meetings, including the specialized working groups in the spring of 2015. Other outreach and feedback efforts

include 45 road show meetings, which is when any group in the community can request for PAZ staff to give a tailored presentation or discussion on whatever topic is most needed. Planning and Zoning staff also led community walks, Coffee with CodeNEXT, and Speak Up Austin discussion forums.

- The main theme of the “water and watersheds” prescription is to retain current protections and strengthen them going forward. The prescription also includes having new and redevelopment mitigate for that site’s share of downstream flooding, matching the rate of discharge to undeveloped conditions. The prescription also includes having sites retain and beneficially use stormwater onsite as much as possible.
- With regard to landscape and trees, the prescription is to leverage current tools while also responding to new realities such as urban heat island effect, climate change, water scarcity, and emerging technologies. Some examples would be integrating a variety of landscape elements throughout a site rather than just in the space between the building and the street. The prescription also supports using a site-by-site approach to tree preservation rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- The prescription also discusses compatibility and transitions between different building types. One potential approach would be to integrate compatibility into the base district. This can be accomplished by regulating for building height and placement, as well as the mass of the building and parking placement.
- With regard to redevelopment, Imagine Austin calls for promoting a compact and connected city, with a focus on new development in corridors and centers. The primary goal of redevelopment is to encourage infill over sprawl. Ways to achieve this include reducing parking requirements in areas that are walkable and urban areas that are served with transit.
- The prescription also calls for promoting green spaces that are both connected, desirable, and multifunctional. One proposal is to increase the range of park open space types and to calibrate those types to particular contexts. For example, creating different park types such as pocket parks, neighborhood parks, greenways, active, and passive parks. The prescription also includes updating parkland dedication fees to account for actual costs, increasing the amount of land to be dedicated, and allowing for credits for private space that's dedicated for public use.
- Chair Pool asked Ms. Todd to clarify the recommendation to allow for double counting one particular feature for two different requirements. Sue Barnett from Development Services explained that one advantage of this practice is that it can incentivize sites to design around existing trees rather than mitigate for trees, giving extra credit for the required landscape area if it incorporates existing trees. Erin Wood (Watershed Protection) explained the benefit of this practice from a green infrastructure and stormwater management perspective. WPD strongly supports the use of required landscape area to also serve as a stormwater infiltration area because of the benefits to water conservation (e.g. irrigating the landscape area with stormwater rather than potable water).

- Chair Pool asked Ms. Wood if developers would naturally want to irrigate landscape areas with stormwater without having to be incentivized. Ms. Wood responded that a 2010 revision to the commercial Landscape Ordinance asked developments to direct storm water to their required landscape area or preserve some undisturbed natural areas. A lot of sites have favored the undisturbed natural area option instead of directing water to the landscaping. Ms. Wood that with the new beneficial use requirements, there will be a much stronger incentive for developments to look at that landscape as a place to infiltrate stormwater.
- Vice Chair Garza asked if Planning and Zoning was in the process of going through public comments to address questions and concerns raised by the prescription papers. Ms. Todd responded that they have been going through the process of distilling the comments and looking for themes and major points of contention.
- Eleanor McKinney and Lauren Ice from the CodeNEXT Code Advisory Group summarized the CAG's report on the Natural and Built Environment prescription paper. Ms. Ice explained that one of the overarching themes of the paper is that a more robust system needs to be developed to respond to comments as the public is giving feedback. Some members of the community and the CAG feel that their feedback is slipping into a black hole and they are not sure how the input is being used.
- The CAG also felt that the Natural and Built Environment prescriptions largely lacked detail and ambition. Ms. McKinney stated that this first report was broader than the other prescription papers, and that there wasn't sufficient focus on green infrastructure and sustainable management.
- Ms. Ice continued to comment the CAG's response to specific recommendations found in the report. The CAG supports the proposed requirement for redevelopment to match rates of discharge to pre-development conditions. The CAG also heard lots of support for the practice of double-counting one particular feature for two different requirements.
- The CAG also is really encouraged by the discussion of Functional Green, which is a proposed menu-based landscape system for properties over 80% impervious cover. Ms. McKinney stated that she was also in support of Functional Green, but that she was concerned that the functional green information will not be ready at the same time as the code. Whereas the code draft will be released in January, the Functional Green piece will not be ready until March.
- Regarding parkland, Ms. Ice emphasized that as the code is changes to encourage missing middle housing, the city needs to continue to aggressively acquire parkland along those centers and corridors. The CAG also supports maintaining the 5% open space and providing sufficient onsite open space in the transitioning middle zone.
- After the CAG's presentation, Chair Pool revisited Vice Chair Garza's question about how Planning and Zoning plans to respond to questions that were submitted as comments. Ms. Todd responded that while Planning and Zoning was not planning on answering the direct comments line by line, but will be responding when there has been a lot of comments on a particular theme.

- Chair Pool also asked when the public engagement piece will be ready to roll out. Jorge Rousselin responded that Planning and Zoning was working on the plan with the consultant team. The engagement plan will be shared with Council and the CAG when it is complete.

Speakers

None.

Direction

No official direction was given. Chair Pool requested that Planning and Zoning staff work with CAG representatives to address their concerns.

Recommendation

There was no recommendation to the full Council.