

open space and parks IN A DENSIFYING REGION

Challenge

Imagine Austin envisions a healthy and vibrant Austin. Growth threatens loss of natural habitat and green spaces that have made Austin vibrant and have traditionally provided places to access nature and recreate in natural environments. In addition, more dense development leaves less space for the creation of new open spaces that provide gathering and other social benefits. The Code does not set a standard for the role open spaces should play in the City. Instead, Code options for open space often create a lowest common denominator for its design.



More dense development leaves less room for private open space. Residents look to parkland nearby to fill the need for open space and recreation areas. This places more pressure on existing parks. More than 60 percent of the land in the city limits is not located within ¼-mile in the urban core and within ½ mile outside the urban core of an existing park. However, meeting parkland dedication requirements is difficult to do on small infill lots. Amount of park acreage per resident could decrease.

Small development sites are not programmed for open space due to lack of requirements for open space. Subchapter E provides a list of open space types that will satisfy requirements. These range from Landscaping to Sport Courts. However, the most common one selected is Landscaping. Often the Landscaping serves a water quality function as well. However, that combination leaves little room for more active, visible, programmed open space. More requirements or incentives for active space are needed in order to gain them in infill.



As the City develops, the City will lose natural land. While this is a negative impact of development, the flip-side is that development provides the opportunity to open previously private scenic and historic areas to the public. Often, however, the natural areas are used for water quality and other drainage infrastructure. While these areas are assigned the term "open space" on site plans or subdivision plats, they are rarely designed to offer any recreational or aesthetic benefits for either residents or the public.

As growth occurs, opportunities for creating open space corridors must be monitored. Off-road connections, like the Barton Creek Greenbelt, are a vital part of Austin's character. In addition, corridors provide healthy recreation and alternative transportation. They also help wildlife share Austin with its increasing population. However, commercial projects aren't required to contribute easements or parkland if their site blocks corridor access. Creation of corridors requires all to participate.



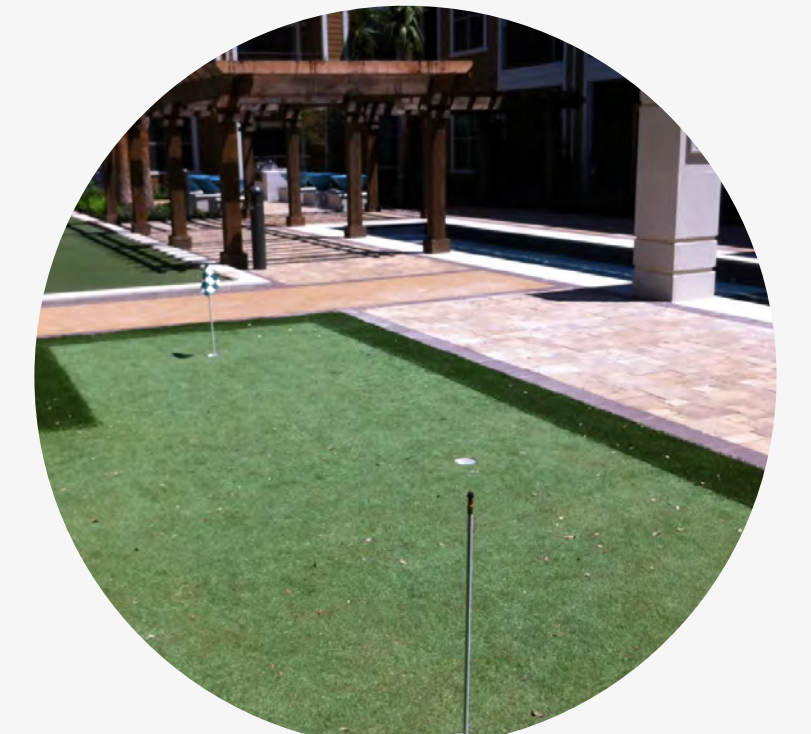
Undefined terms, land uses and zones in the current code create confusion about what is expected of open space: Is it open to the public? What can be developed in it? What function does it serve (drainage, wildlife protection, trail corridors, public gathering?) Current code has definitions for Open Space, Recreation, and Civic that conflict. There are no standards for open space development. Often open spaces are the leftovers in the development, are located at the back of lots, and buildings don't face the open space. The spaces are not usable and lack of visibility from a public street creates safety concerns.

Proposed Code Changes

Imagine Austin sets goals for the City to develop standards for public spaces and to integrate public open space in areas where access is limited. Specifically, Imagine Austin envisions tree-covered open spaces that are integrated into the City fabric. It calls for expanding the number of parks, open spaces and trails throughout the City. It requires that these spaces have high-quality environmentally-sustainable design. These places also should help create a Healthy Austin by providing more opportunities for outdoor play, healthy eating and recreational activities.

2016 Parkland Dedication carries forward into CodeNEXT

The City adopted new Parkland Dedication rules in 2016. The ordinance increased the formula for land dedication from 5 acres per 1,000 to 9.4 acres per 1,000. The change reflects the City's current acreage per 1,000 and strives to keep the ratio of parkland per resident even as growth continues. The ordinance also increased fees in order that the Parks Department could try to acquire more land and develop more parkland. Other new rules allow credit for active recreation amenities built on private parkland. Previously, credit was only given for land that had amenities on it, but no credit was allowed for the cost of building the amenities.

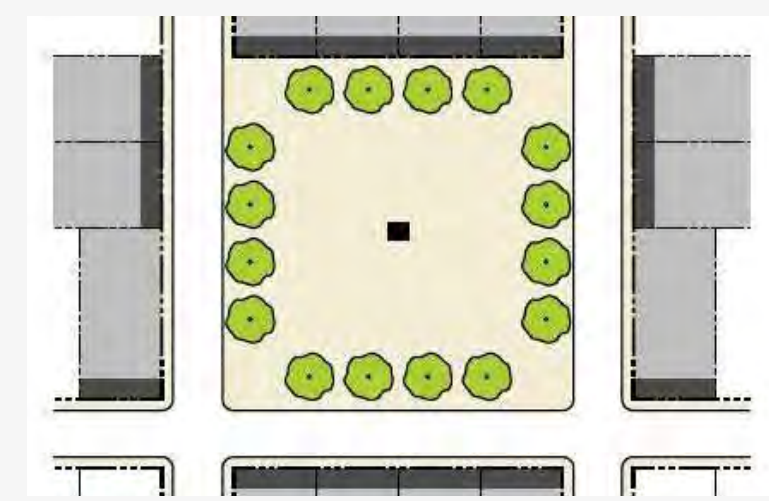


Design Guidelines for Open Space

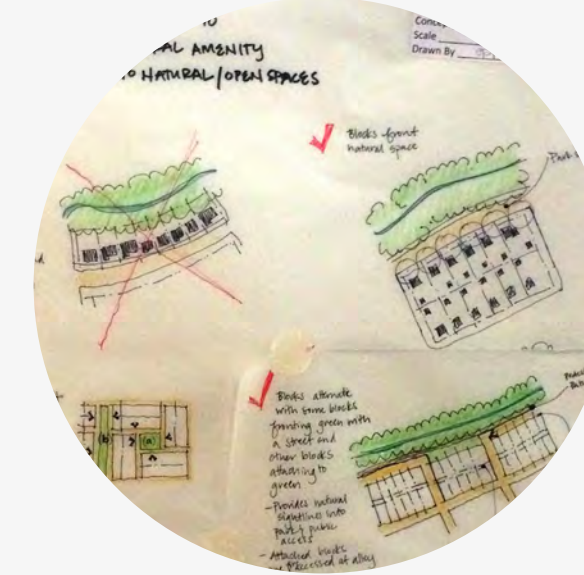
CodeNEXT takes the parks and open space discussion a step further by requiring standards for parks and open space. CodeNEXT creates a Community Design standard applicable to sites that are 4 acres or greater. The open space is required to be accessible to the public and visible from the street. The buildings must face the open space rather than turning their back to it. Under CodeNext, blocks are designed to front a central green or a linear green. Blocks can alternate so that some blocks front greens with a street and other blocks attach to the green. The idea is to provide natural sightlines into the park or green area. Conversations continue on questions about whether more incentives can be provided by calculating impervious cover and common open space differently if parkland is dedicated on a site.



Buildings front the open space



From CodeNEXT 23-4C-1



Opticos Sound Check Event Drawing, Nov. 2015



Open Space available to the public in Austin has this sign

Connectivity for Trails

The City adopted the Urban Trails Master Plan in 2014. The current code does not require development to record easements through property to complete the plan or to build the portion of the trail shown on the plan that traverses their property. The current code provides trail construction as an option to meet Subchapter E requirements, however, it is not required and other options may be chosen. This means we lose the connection at the time of development. CodeNEXT would require trail easement dedication for routes on the Urban Trails Master Plan. After adoption of the plan, the Parks Department and the Public Works Department have worked together to gain some trails in development for parkland dedication or for transportation requirements. The following are already-constructed examples.



Legendary at Parmer



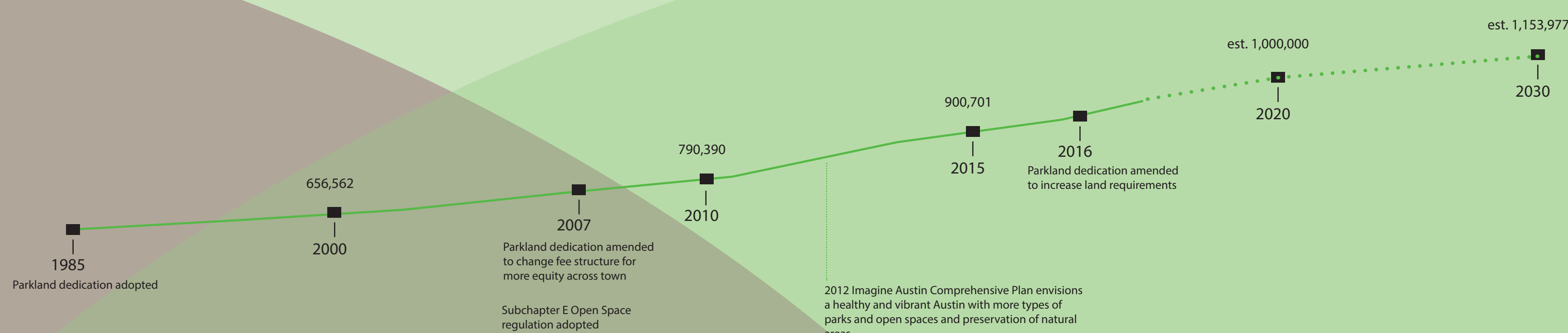
South Lamar at Treadwell



Covered Bridge at US 71

Changes to Terms, Land Uses and Zones

Under the current code, several open space definitions make it difficult to define what is open space and what is required of it. The Code proposes a new Zoning Category called Open Space (OS) that could distinguish parkland and open spaces from other public lands like treatment plants, city offices, and recreation centers. The Zone would be for a newly-defined Passive Recreation Use and for lands preserved for water quality, and wildlife and forest preservation. In addition, the passive recreation and preserve land use would be allowed in any Zone throughout the City.



Help us get it right.

Austin's Land Development Code is getting its most significant update in thirty years. As we work toward adoption of the new code, we invite you to review and comment on the draft code document, ask questions, and stay connected.

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