Compacted and Connected Development or Low Density Development: Which is More Resource-Effective?

During the development of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan (IACP), a number of studies were conducted to gauge the resource-effectiveness of different urban communities. Three studies were conducted specifically to project potential impacts associated with Imagine Austin.

Alternative Futures Working Paper
ftp://ftp.ci.austin.tx.us/GIS-Data/planning/compplan/council-backup-26apr12/5_AlternativeFuturesWP_9.20.10_small.pdf

An initial analysis was conducted on the results of the Community Forum Series (CFS) #2. The community input from the scenario building exercise from CFS #2 generated four possible growth scenarios: a scattered low-density scenario, a crescent scenario which focused growth away from environmentally sensitive land in the southwest and west, a compact centers scenario, as well as a dense, central city redevelopment scenario. In addition to these, staff created a fifth scenario which extrapolated historic and current development trends, current land use regulations, and announced and planned major developments to create a trend scenario map.

Using accepted standards, the Imagine Austin consultant team developed a number of indicators that allowed comparison of the different scenarios. The indicators included measures relating to land use, transportation, the environment, and the economy. Generally speaking, the indicator results showed more positive outcomes with the more compact scenarios.

Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan Infrastructure, Operations, Maintenance and Service Cost Comparison: Preferred Growth Scenario and Trend Growth Scenario
http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Planning/ImagineAustin/Imagine%20Austin%20Comp%20Plan%20Cost%20Report%202012-07_small.pdf
This study, conducted by Chan & Partners Engineering, compared projected infrastructure costs between the Trend Scenario and Preferred Growth Scenario. The major conclusion of this study is that "the preliminary estimates project the costs for the City of Austin of providing public infrastructure and services under the trend growth scenario to be

between $4.8 billion and $21.5 billion higher than the preferred growth scenario over the thirty-year planning period."

Fiscal Impact Analysis of Mixed-Use Redevelopment along South Congress Avenue
ftp://ftp.ci.austin.tx.us/GIS-Data/planning/compplan/council-backup-26apr12/7_COLOR_Austin%20Comp%20Plan%20-%20Fiscal%20Impact%20Analysis%2011%2016%202011_revised.pdf
This study, conducted by Angelou Economics, assessed potential fiscal impacts associated with mixed use redevelopment as envisioned by Imagine Austin along South Congress Avenue from Oltorf Street to Stassney Lane. The analysis estimated:

- Mixed-use redevelopment along the South Congress Avenue corridor is expected to generate nearly $39 million in new annual tax revenue (in 2011dollars), providing a significant boost to Austin's tax base.
- The cumulative new tax revenue from 2011 to 2040 is projected to be over $582 million, assuming a complete build-out by 2040.
- Increased costs for locally-provided services such as schools, police, fire protection, and others.
- The need for infrastructure investments (roads, public transportation, water/wastewater, parks/streetscapes).
- Increased property values will likely make it more difficult to preserve existing affordable housing or construct new affordable housing within the study area.
- High-density infill development provides a much more efficient and sustainable alternative to new greenfield developments in suburban locations.
- The addition of a large amount of jobs and housing along South Congress Avenue would greatly improve the cost-effectiveness of transit within the study area. The study area is within the larger MetroRapid bus rapid transit route 801 (North Lamar/South Congress), which is projected to start service in early 2014.
- The construction of mixed-use developments along South Congress Avenue would be a catalyst for the creation of attractive, walkable neighborhoods along sections of the corridor that are currently dominated by land uses that are not conducive to vibrant street life and pedestrian activity.

In addition to the studies, the City of Austin has commissioned the Building Compact and Connected Speakers Series featuring:

- Christopher Leinberger presenting "Development Trends Toward Walkable Urbanism"

- Ellen Dunham-Jones imparting "Lively Places, Retrofitting Suburban Spaces into Lively Places"
- Mitchell Silver, Tina Axelrad, Veletta Forsythe, and Mike Slavney discussing "Four Cities. Four Land Development Codes. Hear Their Stories"

Please go here to view the videos:
http://www.austintexas.gov/blogs/content/1780/imagine-austin-speaker-series

The findings of these studies and presentations are generally consistent with the findings of a multitude of professional research outside of the Austin context and are listed below.

Bibliography of Articles and Studies about Compact and Connected and Low Density Development

This bibliography includes professional research, articles and studies that focus on various aspects of compact and connected and low density development. These articles can either be found on-line or by contacting Planning and Development Review staff. As much has been written about this topic, the bibliography has been organized by themes.

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