CodeNEXT: The Necessities of Fact Checking
Position Paper
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Introduction:

The CodeNEXT process is a collaborative one, bringing together valuable input from a vast array of individuals, for-profit and non-profit entities, and governmental organizations. The goal of the process is both admirable and necessary to update Austin's development code.

As with any process that brings in such a wide range of viewpoints, people from every walk of life – ranging from developers to community activists – have had the opportunity to add their two cents. The problem with such a widely collaborative effort, however, is that not all people are straight-forward in their goals, and not all people are willing to play by the same rules. One of the most significant ways this can present itself is the intentional use of information ranging from unverifiable to just wrong.

Synopsis:

When such information is used, or viewpoints espoused, and especially when done so by a person who claims expertise or advanced degrees, this can often unduly sway an argument without any real evidence. It is therefore the recommendation of the member-led Fact Checking Work Group that the City Council Members who will ultimately codify CodeNEXT, and the team writing it, have access to a list-serv or similar system wherein they could post questions about statements and claims made in open forms and get answers.

Depending on funding, time, and other issues, how those answers are obtained would be up to those making decisions, but the mechanism could be anywhere from a temporary paid research position, to shifting a current employee with the necessary background, to putting out requests for help from the community at large. Whatever system is put in place, there ultimately needs to be a way for the Council Members and writers to fact check statements before they are taken into consideration vis-à-vis CodeNEXT.

Conclusion:

Getting CodeNEXT right is crucial to Austin's future development, and having solid, factual evidence to support the decision-making process that goes into its writing is one of the most important functions that an advisory committee, whatever form it takes, can provide. ULI's member-led fact-checking work group has witnessed numerous occasions when private citizens and other entities have used hard-to-defend claims to push private agendas, and it therefore is our view that continued vigilance and fact-checking is necessary to aid the City Council and code-writing staff in creating the best development code for all stakeholders, not just the loudest ones.

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