

# **Achieving Child-Friendly Infill Development in Austin's Early Suburbs**

**Sustainable Neighborhoods Public Policy  
Committee**

**Third Revision – August 2013**

**[www.snaustin.org/policies](http://www.snaustin.org/policies)**

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## Preface

This white paper attempts to lay out policy recommendations for preserving the age and income diversity, livability, and strong community of Austin's early suburbs in the coming 30 years, as new housing is added. It also points out special challenges for managing traffic and congestion in early suburbs. In so doing, it acknowledges the need for environmental, fiscal and transportation sustainability in the age of peak oil and global warming. It respects the need for developers to make a profit.

The paper is intended to support decisions by North Central Austin's neighborhood plan contact teams. We hope it will also spur conversations with policymakers, developers, businesses, and other stakeholders.

### *Child-friendly vision*

Children are a key part of a city's age diversity. They have a special place in shaping strong communities. The presence of young children puts people at ease. Children need to be nurtured and protected, and much of a community's social infrastructure emerges in pursuit of these goals. Older residents often find purpose in serving the young.

**“If it works  
for kids, it  
works for  
everyone.”**

Gordon Price, Director of  
the SFU City Program

Retaining children in urban areas over the coming 30 years will not be easy. Even cities

like San Francisco that have tried to implement child-friendly policies over the last ten years have continued to lose children. The percentage of children aged 14 and under in most downtowns ranges from 1 to 6%, compared to a national average of about 25%. In Austin, the percentage of children age 14 and under in 78701 fell from 2.9% in 2000 to 2.7% in 2010. To complicate things, households with children are declining as a percentage of the national population.

The demographics fueling demand for walkable urbanism are young adults and empty nesters. Urbanist rhetoric reflects this market reality. Urbanists speak breathlessly of “24x7 live-work-play” destinations. According to the Urban Land Institute's Emerging Trends in Real Estate – 2007, “Both empty nesters and their young adult offspring gravitate to live in more exciting and sophisticated 24-hour places.” These places are characterized as “hip”, “vibrant”, “exciting,” and “full of energy.” Christopher Leinberger, a popularizer of urbanist development, states, “The age of Leave it to Beaver is over, replaced by the era of Seinfeld.”<sup>1</sup> In Austin, every transit corridor is

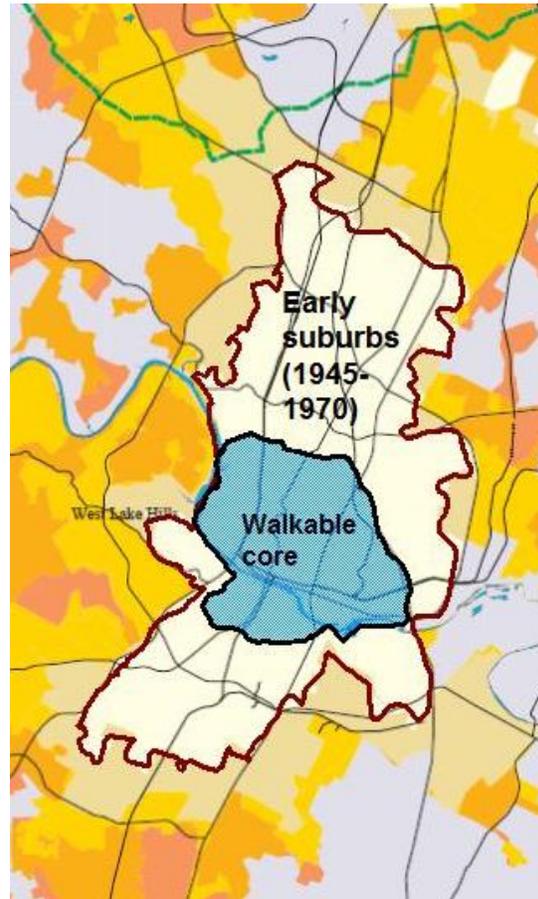


Figure 1: Austin's early suburbs. Rapid car-oriented growth after WWII shaped commercial areas with little or no public space, large block sizes, and a mile or more between major intersections.

<sup>1</sup> Leinberger, Christopher. The Option of Urbanism. 2009. p. 90.

the next "SoCo." The nurturing traits that make suburban development appealing to many people of all ages – autonomy, privacy, and tranquility – are out of fashion and are sidestepped when talk turns to trade-offs.

Sustainable Neighborhoods was organized to shape "live-work-play-sleep" communities that blend the best of city and suburb. Not every walkable location in Austin needs to fit this description (even in North Central Austin we expect that Highland Mall will be more of a hip youth-oriented destination). But other corridors, like Burnet and parts of Anderson, should become Austin's first child-friendly infill corridors. They should be organized around a series of transit-oriented village centers, with lower-density, child-friendly areas in the outer zones of nodes, and on corridor segments between nodes.

## Our vision is "live-work-play-sleep"

### ***Reducing Traffic and Congestion***

Early suburbs – those parts of Austin built out in the twenty-five years after World War II - were designed around arterial road networks that are fundamentally different from downtown's pedestrian-oriented street grids. Suburban roads act like automobile lungs – to breath cars in and out of residential neighborhoods. Nearly all traffic originating within half a mile on either side of an arterial flows down them. East-west connectivity is especially poor, resulting in more vehicle-miles per trip. These roads carry a lot of cross-town traffic as well. Traffic will not go away just because corridors are refurbished with sidewalks and rapid bus stops. Many residents live out of walking distance of transit. There is an enormous risk that as more people are added to these corridors, many of whom will also drive, that suburban corridors will face massive congestion. We already see it on N. Lamar in front of Crestview Station. Every effort needs to be made to arrange land use to reduce traffic and minimize congestion.

### ***Early Suburbs are Different***

Early suburbs have other challenges as well. Because roads are arranged to support driving, large block sizes are the norm. Open space is limited, and rarely located within walking distance of where the City plans to add walkable mixed use. Most creeks are nothing more than ditches, and some of those are paved over. Early suburbs have low density, and will remain lower density in the future except in certain places.

Many showcase studies of redevelopment in early suburbs benefit from depressed land prices. That is not the case on streets like Burnet or Anderson. High land prices pose a significant risk that infill developers will provide less publicly accessible open space. Parks officials have warned that high land costs may lead to acquisition of smaller parcels for park space, in locations peripheral to the dense districts where they are needed as much for connectivity as for recreation.

These many challenges can only be overcome with a clear, practical strategy - one that recognizes the need for context-appropriate trade-offs. This paper attempts to lay out some elements of such a strategy.

### Is Hyde Park a Template for the Suburbs?

Hyde Park was Austin's first suburb, connected to downtown by streetcar in the 1890s. Its slightly higher density, mixed use and walkability are often offered as a template for suburban neighborhoods.

Does the shoe fit?

Several features of Hyde Park will be hard to replicate. These include its compact street grid, proximity to a major destination, and the nature of that destination (a university).

Hyde Park streets are consistently populated throughout the day by residents. Suburban streets depopulate during the workday and late evening.

While the Hyde Park model offers important lessons, one needs to be careful not to overgeneralize.

### VMU at 5350 Burnet: Disconnected

Vertical Mixed Use (VMU) is a zoning category introduced with the Commercial Design Standards/Vertical Mixed Use ordinance in 2007. It requires retail space on the first floor facing the street, and residential or office uses elsewhere. For most properties, the only required open space is along the major street. This requirement may come from the public right of way. While residential developments are required to dedicate parkland to the City, they can instead pay a fee-in-lieu of \$650 per dwelling unit. This money can be spent on parks projects anywhere up to a mile from the development site. If developers provide affordable housing instead, the parkspace fee-in-lieu is waived.

5350 Burnet in 2009 became the first VMU project on Burnet Rd. The four-story VMU building and garage filled up the entire 2.4 acre property. The 165 units are mostly singles-oriented one-bedrooms. The site design shown to Planning Commission included a green pathway connecting to existing apartments to the rear, but this path was never implemented. In fact, there is no publicly accessible open space, or connectivity provided to adjacent lots. The only exception is the streetscape along Burnet Rd. This open space is suitable for shopping, but not for child's play or casual conversations with neighbors. The developers paid over \$100,000 in parkland dedication fees. Not enough to buy any open space near the development, the money is instead depreciating in a holding account. It could eventually be used on projects up to a mile away.

An open space ordinance passed in 2011 has increased minimum publicly accessible open space to 5% for VMU sites over 2 acres. A 2013 revision of the CDS/VMU ordinance makes token provision for transit plazas at the new rapid bus stations – a theme that could be expanded with the Land Development Code rewrite.



5350 BURNET... THE "REAL AUSTIN"

BURNET ROAD IS THE "REAL AUSTIN" AND LIKE SOUTH CONGRESS, IS FILLED WITH FUNKY SHOPS AND RESTAURANTS.

**DON'T MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY.**  
RESERVE YOUR FLOOR PLAN

## Executive Summary

This paper offers five principles and 15 recommendations for redevelopment on early suburban mixed use corridors that neighborhoods, developers and policymakers can apply to retain children and reduce traffic congestion.

All the principles and recommendations are consistent with the goals and actions of the City of Austin Comprehensive Plan.

### **Principle #1: Zone higher land use densities closest to higher quality transit**

1. Target density of 30-90 units per acre within 1/8 mile of bus rapid transit (BRT) hubs.
2. Target density of 10-30 units per acre in transitional zones from 1/8 to ¼ mile from BRT hubs.
3. Target density of 10-30 units per acre in transitional zones along the corridor itself, more than ¼ mile from BRT hubs.

### **Principle #2: Increase transit quality by making rapid transit nodes at major intersections truly pedestrian-friendly**

4. Publicly-accessible ground-level open space from all sources should be at least 10% near transit.
5. Corridor nodes include low-traffic side streets, smaller block sizes, transit plazas, sidewalks, detached shared use parking, parks, trails and other features.
6. Offer density bonuses for development within 1/8 mile of bus rapid transit hubs, in exchange for public open space beyond 10% to further raise transit quality.
7. Each node should have a recognizable central gathering place, located so as to draw people to transit and destinations.

### **Principle #3: Target 24% children in the population, consistent with the national average**

8. Preserve 80% multi-bedroom units in the housing stock for age-diverse areas
9. In the outer zones of transit centers, rezone both single family and VMU to medium-density housing
10. Encourage more child-friendly housing near schools, libraries and grocery stores.
11. Transitional zones on the corridor itself should have extra buffering from the road to ensure safer, less stressful places for children.

### **Principle #4: Shape a strong pedestrian environment that encourages walking, biking and transit, eyes on the street, and an emotional connection to the neighborhood**

12. Implement the City's recommendation to provide pocket parks within ¼ mile of residences in the urban core. Parks should be within 1/8 mile of residences in areas with a high ratio of multi-family housing. Such areas should get priority for new park acquisition.
13. Locate urban parks in the "Goldilocks Zone" – not right on busy streets, and not away from densely populated areas.
14. Make sure the City's master trails plan covers the smaller creeks (ditches, really) that run through Austin's early suburbs, especially within mixed use districts.

### **Principle #5: Ensure strong communities where at least half of residents are planning to live in their homes for more than five years**

15. Encourage property owners or managers to implement policies that increase long-term tenancy, including a balance of owned and leased units, use of long-term leases, appreciation agreements, and active marketing to young households with children.

## Principle #1 – Zone Density Nearest to Quality Transit

### Vulnerability of Suburban Arterials to Congestion

Suburban major arterials are designed to move traffic from adjacent circulator streets to highways. They also facilitate cross-town traffic. Unlike downtown grids that distribute traffic down multiple alternative routes, suburban arterials are designed to be the primary route within a half-mile area. Traffic volumes for a suburban 4-lane arterial with middle turning lane typically range between 20,000 and 35,000 vehicle trips per day. Austin Transportation Department (ATD) gives Burnet Rd near Lamar MS a Level of Service (LOS) designation of E, which means fairly congested. ATD gives Burnet north of 183 a LOS of F, or failing. ATD forecasts LOS of F for all of Burnet over the coming 20 years.<sup>2</sup>

Poor east-west connectivity heightens North Central Austin's congestion risk. In the 4.1 miles of Burnet Rd between 45<sup>th</sup> and 183 there are only 3 intersections that connect east-west to Mopac and 183/Lamar. Two of these (Anderson, Ohlen-Steck) have constraints that limit vehicle flow.

As new residential housing emerges along these roads, the new residents will add to locally-generated traffic. Conversely, current per capita car use of existing residents should go down. A third source of traffic – cross-town trips originating from outside half a mile of the corridor – could increase or decrease depending upon the success of the regional transportation plan.

#### Simple traffic model for 5-lane suburban arterial

##### Existing traffic – 30,000 cars a day

- from nearby existing residents – 15,000
- from pass-thru trips – 15,000

##### Future traffic – 43,850 cars a day

- from nearby existing residents – 12,750
- from 10,000 future residents – 16,100
- from pass-thru trips – 15,000

A simple model helps to show level-of-magnitude impacts. Assume that existing traffic on Burnet Rd is 30,000 car trips per

**The model shows the order of magnitude of car trips that have to be “converted” to prevent massive traffic congestion.**

day. Assume that half are from existing residents and half from pass-thru trips.

Assume that over time, trips by existing

residents drop by 15%, pass-thru traffic remains the same, and that 10,000 new residents are added on Burnet south of 183, in line with the Comprehensive Plan Preferred Growth Scenario. Federal Highway Administration surveys suggest the typical person makes 3.79 trips per day.<sup>3</sup> If, consistent with TIA traffic impact numbers for new housing on Burnet, new residents make 85% of their trips by car, then that is 16,100 new vehicle trips at any given point.<sup>4</sup> The new traffic count for a given location on Burnet is 43,850.

Burnet can't support that much traffic. The City's plan is to convert car traffic into walking, biking and transit trips.<sup>5</sup> What the model above demonstrates is just how many trips have to be converted to prevent failing LOS and greatly increased traffic on residential side streets.

<sup>2</sup> City of Austin traffic count on 6/27/05 near Lamar MS was 26,731. Summer-time counts tend to be lower since schools are out. 2005 TxDOT saturation counts: Burnet near Lamar Middle School - 28,570. Burnet just south of Anderson Ln - 32,750. TxDOT spring 2005 saturation count for N. Lamar Blvd near the future Crestview station – 31,970. Burnet north of 183 - 40,540. A COA count for the same area on 1/19/05 - 33,936.

<sup>3</sup> 2009 National Household Travel Survey, Federal Highway Administration.

<sup>4</sup> To simplify, this model assumes that each trip has a 50% chance of crossing a given point on the corridor.

<sup>5</sup> Certero, 1993. Residents within ½ mile of light rail stations used transit for 12% of “main trips”, with 3.2% by bus transit. Holtzclaw, 2002, found a doubling of density led to a 25% reduction in vehicle miles traveled. FHA data show US average is about 80% vehicle trips out of total trips.

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This will be an enormous challenge, one requiring careful attention to arrangement of density, quality of pedestrian infrastructure, and quality of transit.

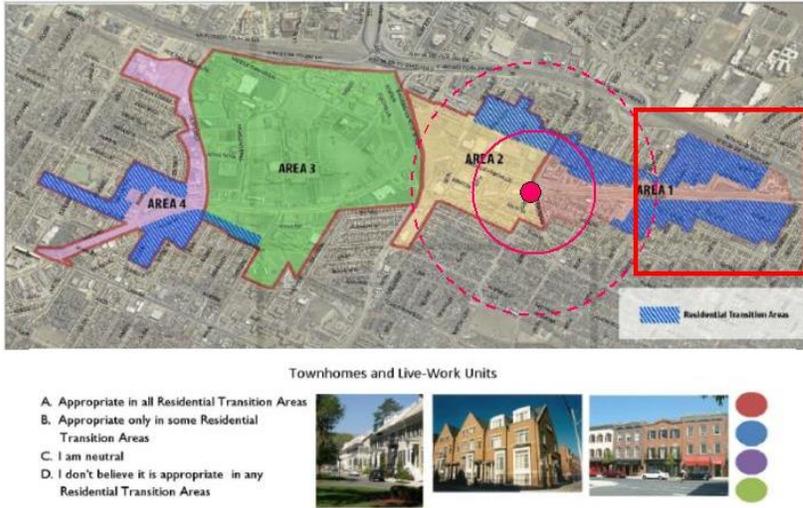


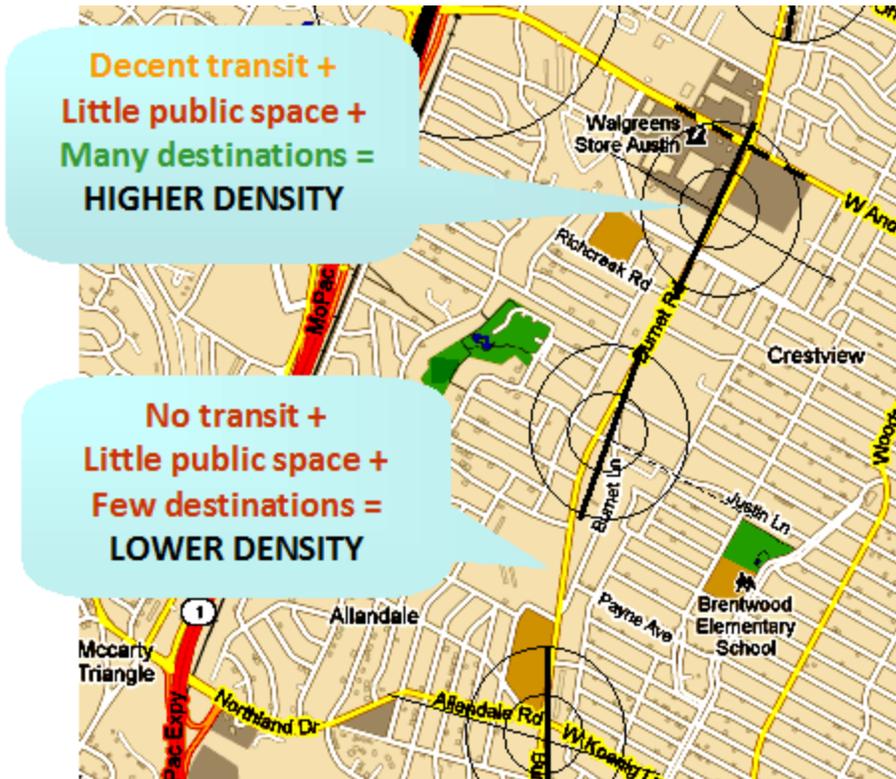
Figure 2. The innocuous part of Airport Blvd in the red box above could add up to 5,160 more car trips a day on surrounding streets. This assumes another 10 units per acre are added to an 80-acre area more than half a mile from rapid transit, and that the 1,600 new residents make 3.8 trips a day, 85% of which are by car.

The City of Austin Comprehensive Plan description of activity corridors enshrines the principle of matching density to conditions that reduce traffic:

***“Intensity of land use should correspond to the availability of quality transit, public space, and walkable destinations.”*** Imagine Austin, Activity Corridors, p 106

Figure 3. Conditions for reducing traffic along Burnet Rd are uneven.

Imagine Austin’s vision for activity corridors lays the groundwork for putting the density where there are already conditions to reduce car trips. The City can justify additional density if it funds more public space or other amenities that get people out of cars.



**Recommendation #1 – Target density of 30-90 units per acre, within 1/8 mile of bus transit (BRT) hubs.**

To be successful, walkable urbanism requires a critical mass of people, destinations, and fast, convenient transit. The Urban Land Institute offers a rule of thumb of at least 200,000 sq. ft of retail and 2,000 dwelling units within a roughly six block area.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Freedman, an urban planner at Freedman Tung & Sasaki, has proposed reconceptualizing suburban corridors as “nodes and segments.” Nodes (centers) have the preconditions for successful walkable urbanism. They are generally located on one corner of a major intersection that serves as a rapid transit hub, with sufficient depth to support lots of residents and destinations.<sup>7</sup> Most retail along the corridor will gravitate to nodes. Segments between nodes would offer lower density housing, while retaining some community-serving retail and some car-oriented uses.<sup>8</sup> This model minimizes traffic by putting most of the new residents closer to quality transit and numerous destinations.



Figure 4. Node-and-segment corridor plan for the suburban Columbia Pike arterial in Arlington, Virginia.

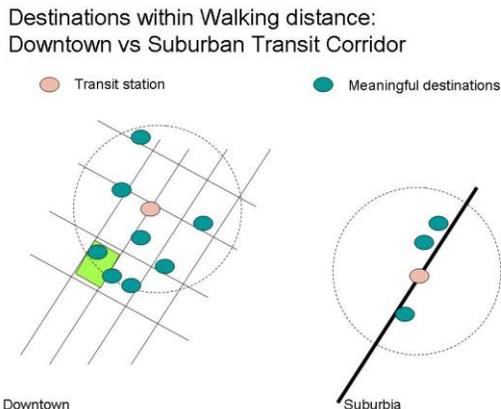


Figure 5. The illustration at left shows the two-dimensional distribution of destinations on a downtown street grid. The illustration at right shows how suburban corridors constrain the number of destinations. Node-and-segment corridors can partially compensate for this effect.

Nodes (village centers) have enticing outdoor amenities that draw people out of their homes and cars. Small local streets permit circulation of cars, bicycles and pedestrians. Pedestrian comfort is a priority. Sidewalks are extrawide. Car traffic circulation is slow and non-threatening. Unlike on the busy arterial, the center streets are relatively quiet and pollution-free.

Freedman emphasizes that centers need a central focus – a “center of the center”, often a public square, plaza, or main street (see Recommendation #7). The main street is not necessarily the arterial. It will only work if people can have a pleasant conversation and don’t feel stressed by street noise and smells. Parking is arranged such that visitors “park once and walk.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Leinberger uses a Floor-to-Area metric, arguing that the minimum density for successful walkable places is 0.8 FAR. Leinberger, p 114.

<sup>7</sup> Where corridors bisect centers, Freedman follows Peter Calthorpe’s rule that corridors should be broken up into separate streets, with a block in between.

<sup>8</sup> Freedman, Michael, in collaboration with Gregory Tung and Ellen Greenberg. “Restructuring the Commercial Strip: A Practical Strategy for Planning the Revitalization of Deteriorating Strip Corridors.” 2009.

[http://www.grandboulevard.net/images/stories/library/Freedman/corridor%20revitalization\\_01\\_v3%20final.pdf](http://www.grandboulevard.net/images/stories/library/Freedman/corridor%20revitalization_01_v3%20final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Freedman, 16.

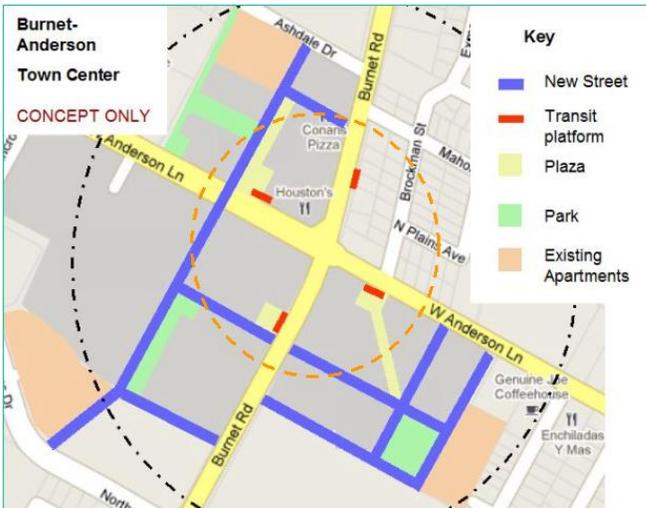


Figure 6. A plan for the intersection of Burnet at Anderson should treat the NW, SW and SE corners as three distinct “centers”, each equipped with a complete set of pedestrian amenities. All share the same transit hub.

Freedman states that centers should only be arranged on one corner of a major intersection, unless the road itself can somehow be realigned or slowed down to make it more pedestrian friendly. “The easiest mistake to make in the re-planning of commercial corridors is to plan retail concentrations on all four corners of a large intersection, and label the intersection a ‘center’ on the restructuring plan. Intersections offering sufficient visibility to host a city or

“The easiest mistake is to plan retail on all four corners of an intersection, and label the intersection a ‘center’”

regional center will necessarily feature a multiplicity of through-lanes and turning lanes, resulting in very wide crossing distances. All pedestrians will perceive retail development located on different quadrants of such intersections as separate destinations. The kind of easy pedestrian circulation across streets and between uses that is essential to a successful city center will simply not happen across primary arterial intersections, and no amount of design amenity will change that.”<sup>10</sup>

**North Central Austin Nodes & Segments**

- 1 Highland Mall Regional Center
- 2 Crestview Station Town Center
- 3 Middle Fiskville Rd district
- 4 Anderson Ln Neighborhood Center
- 5 Burnet-Anderson district
- 6 Anderson Square village center
- 7 Burnet-183 district
- 8 Allandale village center
- 9 Burnet-North Loop village center
- 10 Lamar-2222 district
- 11 Burnet-Adams-Shoalmont segment
- 12 Farmer’s Market segment
- 13 Burnet-Steck-Ohlen segment
- 14 Anderson-Wooten Park-Woodrow segment

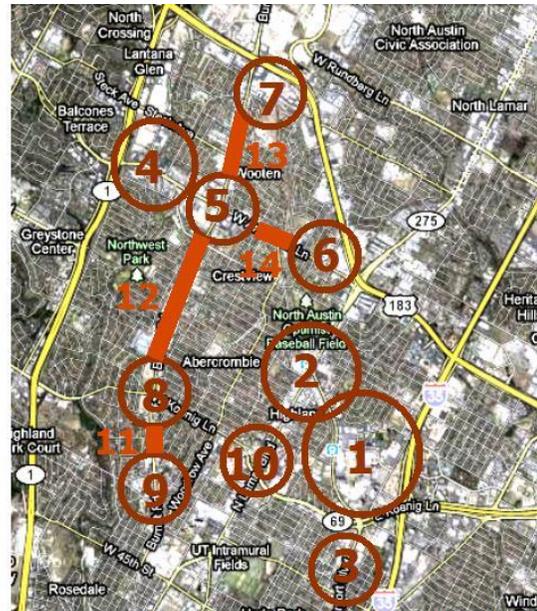


Figure 7 – Nodes and segments identified by SN on North Central Austin’s arterials. Density of centers will vary widely.

**Recommendation #2 – Target density of 10-30 units per acre in transitional zones from 1/8 to 1/4 mile from BRT hubs.**

Density should be arranged in zones corresponding to proximity to transit. The densest zone is within a block of the station area. This is an acceptable area to put more singles-oriented housing, since singles are more likely to use transit anyway and may prefer the vitality at the center of such a district. An outer, transitional zone beyond the first block or two will have medium

<sup>10</sup> Freedman, 18.

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or even lower density housing, much of it suitable for households with children. <sup>11</sup> The density for a given center should be based on the quality of transit, including such factors as service frequency, station and vehicle comfort, ease and attractiveness of station connectivity, number of nearby destinations, number of available transit routes, and proximity to regional centers.

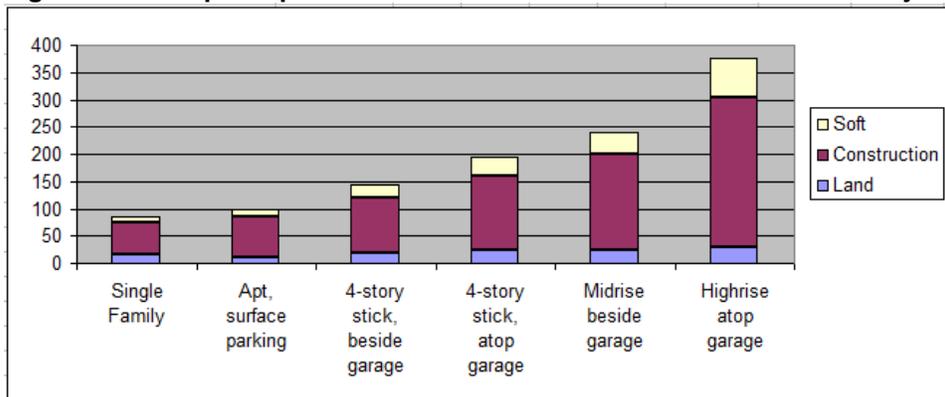
It is a common misconception that high density housing is more affordable. Actually, as the construction data in figures 8-10 demonstrate, lower density housing types are cheaper to build per square foot and therefore are more affordable. Family-friendly housing for a given construction type is more expensive because families generally need more bedrooms.

The most affordable housing types – townhomes, duplexes, rowhouses – offer reasonable density plus sufficient indoor and outdoor playspace. They are well suited for transitional zones.

**Figure 8: Costs per Square Foot for Six Different Austin Residential Projects** <sup>12</sup>

Construction Type	Location	Land	Construction	Soft	Total	Cost Coefficient
Single Family	Suburbs	15	60	10	85	1.0
Garden Apartment, surface parking	Suburbs	10	75	15	100	1.2
4-story stick apartment, beside garage	Early Suburbs	20	100	25	145	1.7
4-story stick apartment, atop garage	Early Suburbs	25	135	35	195	2.3
Midrise beside garage	Downtown	25	175	40	240	2.8
Highrise atop garage	Downtown	30	275	70	375	4.4

**Figure 9: Costs per Square Foot for Six Different Austin Residential Projects**



**Figure 10: Construction Cost Coefficients for Seven Residential Projects** <sup>13</sup>

Construction Type	Est Units/Ac	Cost Coefficient
Single Family	10	1
Duplex	15	0.95
Row Houses	20-25	0.9
4-story stick, stacked rowhouses	30-35	1.2
4-story stick, atop garage	35-45	1.6
8-story concrete midrise	45-75	2
Highrise atop garage	75-125	2.5

<sup>11</sup> Galina Tachieva uses five-minute walking distance (1/4 mile) to define both neighborhood centers and the service area of rapid bus stops. The service area of light rail stations is 1/2 mile. Sprawl Repair Manual, 2010. p 23, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Provided courtesy Ed Wendler, Jr., local developer. 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Explaining Residential Density. John G. Ellis. Excludes land, "soft" costs. 2004.

**Recommendation #3 – Target density of 10-30 units per acre in transitional zones along the corridor itself, more than ¼ mile from BRT hubs.**

Not every place along a suburban mixed use corridor has the right conditions for walkable mixed use. Leinberger calls places that don't quite get there "Neverlands." He even calls out suburban corridors as such places.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly plausible for the narrow stretches of the corridor between nodes that Freedman calls "segments."



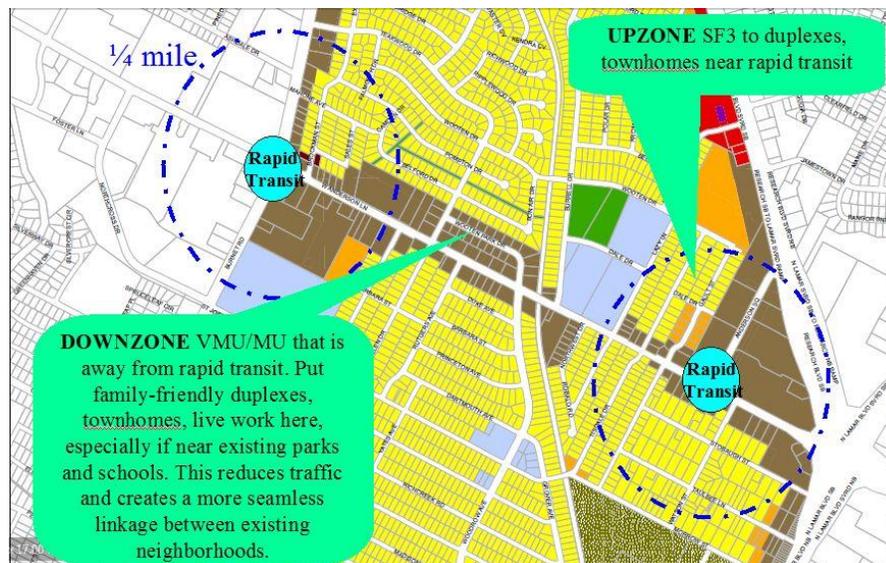
Figure 11. Mansion-style two-story housing on a corridor in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Freedman notes that ample set-backs and lush landscape buffers are key to the success of housing on busy corridors.

Freedman's strategy for "segments" is to use it for lower density residential housing (townhomes, mansion-style condos, even detached single-family with shared yards on rear alleys). His strategy is market-based, acknowledging rising demand for infill housing as well as the current oversupply of retail.

This approach transitions well into the existing neighborhoods and integrates residential areas across the arterial. The net traffic impact for the corridor of low-residential density may actually be neutral, since less retail means fewer turns across traffic. On-street overflow parking in adjacent residential areas is minimized. Such housing along a busy street does need extensive buffering to work. Buffering is described in Recommendation #11 below.

Freedman's "segments" approach is similar to what is being proposed for narrow parts of Airport Blvd between 2222 and I35, except that Freedman treats the property directly on the corridor as the transitional zone. This part of the corridor, which is more car-oriented and with more yardspace, can be utilized for more affordable, family-friendly housing.

Figure 12. Illustration of how segments and nodes would be applied to Anderson Ln between Burnet and Lamar. This corridor is especially vulnerable to congestion due to the bottlenecked intersection at Anderson and N Lamar.



<sup>14</sup> Leinberger, 114.

## Principle #2 – Increase Transit Quality with Pedestrian Infrastructure

### Experience from Other Cities: San Diego

“Encourage the provision of approximately ten percent of a project's net site area as public space, with adjustments for smaller (less than ten acres) or constrained sites. Public space may be provided in the form of plazas, greens, gardens, pocket parks, amphitheaters, community meeting rooms, public facilities and services, and social services”

-- *San Diego General Plan*

Principle #2 is amply described in the Comprehensive Plan. As an example:

**Land Use & Transportation Action #3:** “Establish land use and street design regulations to create sustainable neighborhoods that are child-friendly, support walking and bicycling, are in proximity to daily needs, provide a range of housing-type options (duplexes, townhouses, row houses, small-scale apartments, smaller lot single-family) to meet the needs of people of different means and at different stages of their lives.”

Because activity corridors serve two different functions (place to live, means of transport), they represent a high risk environment. The following recommendations are intended to reduce risk:

***Recommendation #4: Publicly-accessible ground-level open space from all sources should be at least 10% near transit.***

There is a wealth of analysis about the functionality of open space. An excellent primer is the City of Austin Design Commission's Urban Design Guidelines. Often, policymakers tend to downplay the quantity of open space, arguing instead for quality based on attention to function. This is valid only to a point – you can't add quality if you don't have the dirt. In particular, you need space at those places that need to be the most pedestrian friendly, like near transit stations.

How much is enough? Sustainable Neighborhoods analyzed maps of various mixed use districts around Austin. Those places generally considered the most successful – 2<sup>nd</sup> Street District, The Triangle, the UT campus, had open space between 15% and 30%. Those places like Crestview Station that seem somewhat cramped had about 7%.

**3.6% open space  
represents a  
great risk to  
early suburbs**

Like everything else, public space is a trade-off. City staff in their analysis for the Open Space ordinance settled on 5% publicly-accessible open space as a minimum requirement for much new development. This is probably an appropriate minimum to require from developers, but the actual minimum amount of space from all sources to achieve a strong pedestrian-friendly environment is probably closer to 10%.

Even with the new Open Space ordinance, existing City mechanisms to achieve functional publicly accessible open space do not get the job done. Figure 13 offers minimum and maximum estimates of open space that will become available for the area around the intersection of Burnet

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at Anderson using existing mechanisms. The same mechanism may yield very different results, depending upon the assumptions one makes. For instance, the Open Space ordinance lets up to half of public open space be above ground, where it does little to encourage connectivity and is mostly out of sight.<sup>15</sup> Properties under 2 acres are exempt (many of the properties closest to the intersection are under 2 acres).

Open space of just 3.6% for neighborhood centers represents one of the big risks of poorly-executed infill development in Austin's early suburbs.

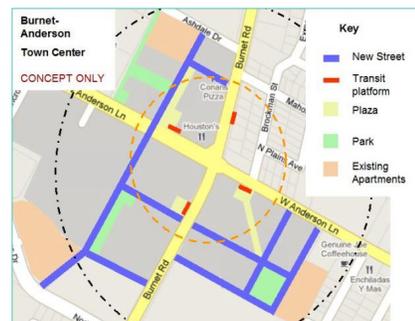
**Figure 13. Estimates of the minimum and maximum amounts of ground-level publicly-accessible open space for the quarter-mile radius around the intersection of Burnet at Anderson, using existing City mechanisms**

Open Space Category	Min	Max
Existing public park space	0	0
Existing private common open space	1.75	1.75
Required ground-level Private Common Open Space, ~65 ac, assuming new Open Space ordinance <sup>16</sup>	0	3.25
Parkland Dedication assuming (8,823 units x \$650)/\$1.5M (70 units/acre)	---	3.82
Parkland Dedication assuming (1,875 units x \$650)/\$1.5M (15 units/acre)	0.8	---
<b>TOTAL (Acres)</b>	<b>2.55</b>	<b>8.82</b>
<b>% Open Space</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>5.6%</b>
<b>Average of Min and Max OS</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	

**Recommendation #5: Nodes on corridors include low-traffic side streets, smaller block sizes, transit plazas, sidewalks, detached shared use parking, parks, trails and other features.**

Local street grids are indispensable for shaping a walkable community. The lack of such grids in suburban areas is a key weakness of the infill development paradigm.

Some places, like the intersection of Burnet-Anderson, can be retrofitted with street grids mostly just by utilizing the existing driveways of malls and strip centers. To achieve an actual grid over time, the City needs to define the circulation plan for all of the properties in the center. This should be done first, followed by definition of an open space plan, including transit plazas near the corner of the intersection arranged so that pedestrians can easily make transfers to other transit lines. Form based zoning makes particular sense for such districts.



**Figure 14. A plan for the intersection of Burnet at Anderson should include future side streets that create a walkable local grid.**

<sup>15</sup> Sustainable Neighborhoods requested an amendment to this rule during the draft review. It may have been updated.  
<sup>16</sup> 65 acres is the amount of land within the district subject to the min. open space requirement.

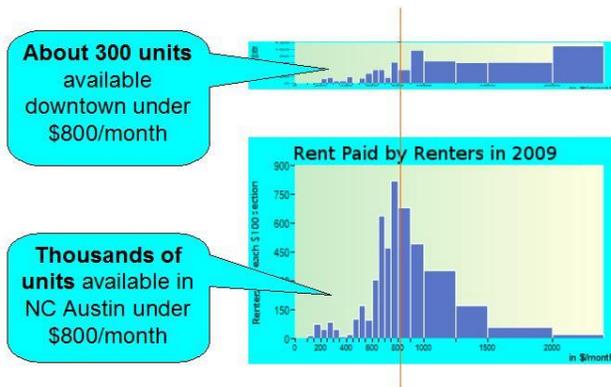
Future retail and open space would mostly be oriented along the pedestrian-friendly sidestreets, rather than onto busy Burnet. Building arrangement would permit good visibility from the arterial to the sidestreets and plazas, encouraging passers-by to park and enter the district on foot. Parking garages, if shared between residential and commercial uses, require fewer spaces. If they are detached from apartments, the modest extra effort to walk to the garage makes walking or biking a more competitive option to driving, thus reducing traffic.

**Recommendation #6: Offer density bonuses for development within 1/8 mile of bus rapid transit hubs, in exchange for public open space beyond 10% to further raise transit quality.**

City development incentives generally go to affordable housing, not open space. This reflects conditions in downtown and near East Austin, but less so the early suburbs in North Austin.

Land prices downtown are eight to ten times as expensive as land prices in early suburbs. Developers have to build mid-rises and high-rises to make a profit. Mid-rises and high-rises are expensive to build, so very little of the new housing in downtown is affordable.<sup>17</sup> Downtown does have significant legacy open space. Austin is especially fortunate in this regard, since state-owned features like the Capitol complex and The University of Texas at Austin provide lots of walkable, attractive areas.

**Affordability: 78701 vs 78757**



**Figure 15: Just as downtown is blessed with legacy open space, early suburbs are blessed with legacy affordable housing. The two graphs above from city-data.com have been adjusted to comparable scale. North Austin retains thousands of multi-family units built out in the 1960s and 1970s.**

Early suburbs have a fair amount of legacy affordable housing (see Figure 15), but little legacy public space. Moreover, land prices are lower than downtown, allowing for affordable housing categories like townhomes, duplexes, fourplexes, and rowhouses. They become even more realistic if the City zones land appropriately. Upzoning properties farther from transit and other destinations creates market expectations that drive land prices up. More modest zoning can reduce land price speculation, and allow medium-density housing to get built.<sup>18</sup>

If the City adopts this approach to affordable housing, incentives can instead be directed to increasing the amount of open space, thereby improving transit quality.

<sup>17</sup> Also, price-controls don't actually increase net affordability, since unsubsidized units become more expensive.

<sup>18</sup> Paul D. Gottlieb and Adesoji Adelaja, The Impact of Down-Zoning on Land Values. Agricultural Finance Review 2009. The team modeled land prices in rural Maryland and urban New Jersey. They conclude that down-zoning reduces land prices where development is imminent.

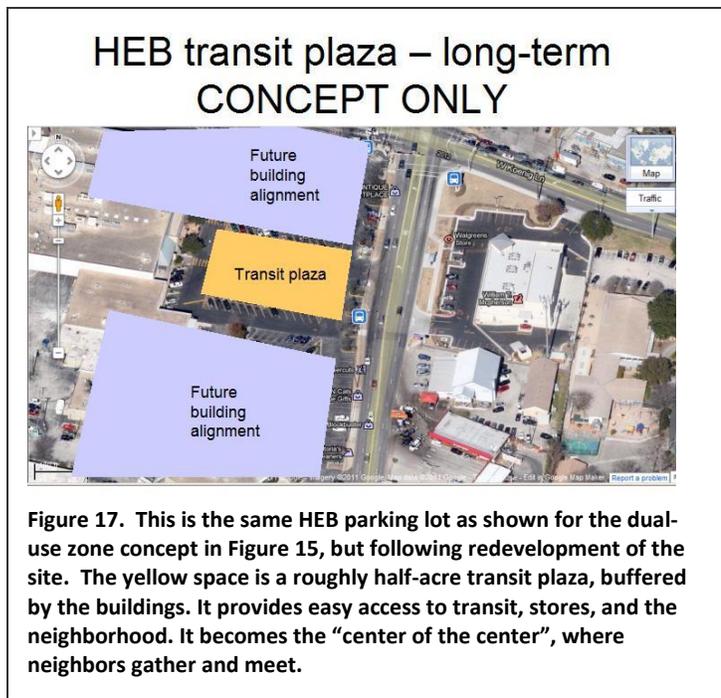
**Recommendation #7: Each node should have a recognizable central gathering place, located so as to draw people to transit and destinations.**

Transit plazas are the gateway from transit to the district and its various destinations. They are also “people magnets” that draw surrounding residents to retail and to transit.

Well designed plazas can also serve the role of community gathering space – an essential feature for a truly walkable neighborhood. Their unique design becomes the highly visible symbol OF the neighborhood.

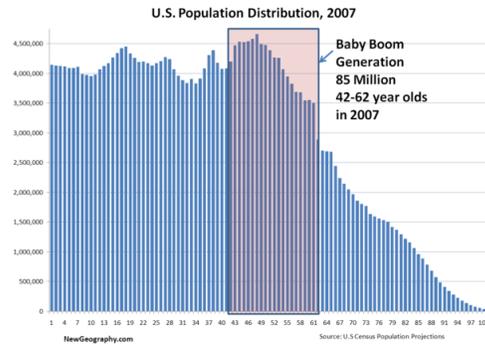
A transit plaza will almost always bound a street, often two streets. Ideally it will be partly enclosed by buildings. This buffers the space from the street and elements. It also enhances the plaza’s role as the means of connection to destinations.

The City of Austin in 2013 updated the Commercial Design Standards ordinance to require that between 150 sq ft and 1000 sq ft of required open space in a new development adjacent to a rapid bus station be arranged in support of transit. These small spaces reflect today’s pedestrian use, not the use expected over time. Still, the change is a first step in the right direction and should provide food for thought during the Land Development Code rewrite process.

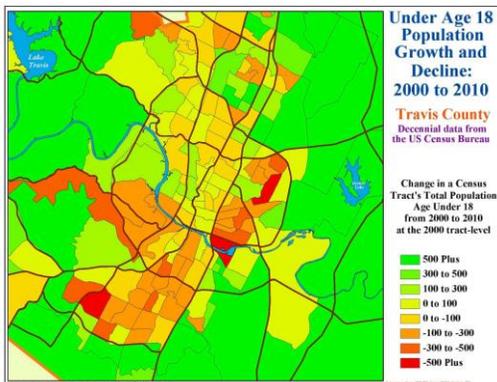


### Principle #3 – Preserve Age Diversity – 24% children in the population, consistent with the national average

Child-friendliness is not just a factor of absolute numbers of children, but of their relative proportion in the population. This influences availability of support networks within walking distance, tolerance for children by other neighbors, and the composition of available retail services. If most people in a neighborhood are affluent empty-nesters, the neighborhood may be served by a high-end niche grocery store unaffordable to many families. As Timothy Egan states in a New York Times article, “The very things that attract people who revitalize a city – dense vertical housing, fashionable restaurants and shops and mass transit that makes a car unnecessary – are driving out children by making neighborhoods too expensive for young families.”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 18: Here come the Baby Boomers! Demand for singles-oriented housing will accelerate over the coming 20 years. Baby boomer offspring reinforce the trend.**



**Figure 19: Changes in absolute numbers of children per census tract reveals the continued appeal of the suburbs.**

Austin’s child-age demographics resemble a “donut”, with a majority of children segregated to outlying suburbs.

This result has multiple causes. Downtown is unaffordable and the majority of housing is poorly suited to children. While 78701 child demographics have climbed from a very low base from 2000 to 2010, closer inspection of census data shows that the proportional increase is due to teenagers aged 15 to 17. The percentage of children aged 0-14 has actually fallen. In early suburbs like North Central Austin where very little new housing has been added, much of the existing child-friendly housing stock is used by long-time residents who are aging in place. In

East Austin, gentrification has accelerated an outward migration of households with children to the suburbs. The suburbs themselves remain appealing, with ample affordable, child-friendly housing and good schools.

Meanwhile, demographic trends favor even more childless households. These households - young adults and empty nesters - are increasingly choosing to down-size their homes and live in walkable urban places.<sup>20</sup> With premiums for walkable urban environments of 40% to 200% over

<sup>19</sup> Egan, Timothy. “Vibrant Cities Find One Thing Missing: Children”. New York Times, March 25, 2005. From Families and Children Task Force Report, June 2008.

<sup>20</sup> America’s population could grow by 100 million by 2037, with two-thirds of new housing and jobs located in “second-tier” suburbs built between 1950 and 2000. Arthur C Nelson, Metropolitan Research Center, University of Utah, as quoted in Sprawl Repair Manual, Tachieva, 2010

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equivalent properties in the suburbs,<sup>21</sup> one can understand the enthusiasm of developers to build lots of efficiency and one-bedroom units appealing to a safe demographic.

It is the job of planners to understand the risks of such waves. In 10-20 years, Austin may have overdeveloped housing that excludes entire segments of the population. The success of the Mueller development showcases how urban infill can appeal to households with children too. As twenty-somethings become thirty-somethings, availability of child-friendly infill could become a competitive advantage for cities smart enough to anticipate a counter-trend.

**Figure 20: Change in Children Age 0-17 as Percentage of Population by Zip Code**

Zip	Area	2000			2010		
		Total	Children	Children %	Total	Children	Children %
78701	Downtown	3855	142	3.7%	6841	284	4.2%
78702	East Austin	22534	6942	30.8%	21334	4870	22.8%
78704	South Austin	43249	7769	18.0%	42117	6343	15.1%
78751	Hyde Park/North Loop	14005	1478	10.6%	14385	1431	9.9%
78757	Burnet/Anderson	21415	3698	17.3%	21310	3852	18.1%
78758	North Austin near Domain	42820	9218	21.5%	44072	10610	24.1%
78759	Arboretum	40547	7333	18.1%	38586	6874	17.8%
78739	Far Southwest	8643	3030	35.1%	16792	5549	33.0%
	United States			25.7%			24.0%

The Comprehensive Plan addresses child-friendliness, but fails to make it a ‘priority program.’ If other goals are to take priority, Austin should instead identify places best suited for age diversity, like the streets running through existing age-diverse residential neighborhoods, and develop niche infill products that preserve the inherent competitive advantages of such places. There will be plenty of denser places with more compelling lifestyle benefits (Downtown, Highland Mall, North Burnet Gateway) to meet the needs of the dominant demographic trend.

**Land Use & Transportation Action #3:** “Establish land use and street design regulations to create sustainable neighborhoods that are child-friendly, support walking and bicycling, are in proximity to daily needs, and provide a range of housing-type options such as duplexes, townhouses, row houses, small-scale apartments, and houses on smaller lots to meet the needs of people of different means and at different stages of their lives.”

**Housing & Neighborhoods Action #3:** “Produce regulations and enhance programs to promote affordable housing throughout Austin by... 1) Preserving existing affordable housing, 2) Allowing for diverse housing types throughout Austin, 3) Balancing homeownership and rental opportunities...”

**Children, Families & Education Policy #12.** “Increase the variety of housing options (such as the types of housing and number of bedrooms) to meet the needs of family and non-traditional households including households with children. (See also LUT 5; H1)”

**Children, Families & Education Policy #20.** “Enact land use and other planning policies that enhance the quality of life for families with children and promote family-friendly neighborhoods and services.”

<sup>21</sup> Leinberger, 97.

***Recommendation #8: Preserve 80% multi-bedroom units in the housing stock for age-diverse areas***

What is family-friendly housing? One definition would be the kind of housing that young families say they want. A 2011 national real estate survey profiled the needs of young families.<sup>22</sup> It found that this segment is far more likely to prefer single-family housing than the public at large:

- Single-family homes, even with more driving (73% young families, 59% overall)
- Apartments, townhomes in walkable area (24%, 38%)

Young families prioritize homes near high quality schools as very important (64% of respondents). Privacy from neighbors is also important (51%), whereas being within a 30 minute commute of work is less critical (36%). Being in an area with sidewalks and places to walk is relatively unimportant to this segment (22%). But so is buying the biggest house possible (17%).

Other than the need for privacy, the survey failed to break down the reasons that young families prefer single-family homes over alternatives like townhomes or apartments. While privacy, tranquility and sense of safety no doubt play a big role, there may be other features that can be accommodated by housing in urban areas. A task force convened by San Francisco's mayor offered the following elements for family-friendly units, developments and neighborhoods:<sup>23</sup>

1. Family-friendly units include:

- 2 to 4 bedrooms
- Ample closet space.
- Full bathrooms with baths as well as showers. In the larger units, an extra half bathroom.
- Larger kitchens providing enough space to cook in
- Family room, large common area
- Space for families to eat together
- Access to the outside— either yard space, balconies. Balconies must be safe for children.
- Windows that open, with safety locks.

2. Units should be affordable, representing no more than 30% of household income

3. Family-friendly developments include:

- Family-friendly units integrated into the development, not segregated.
- Family-friendly units not identifiable from their exteriors
- Adequate laundry facilities
- Child care
- Outdoor play space for children from babies to teens
- Play rooms/community rooms/gathering space for child, family and community functions
- Elevators
- Additional storage (bikes, etc)
- Clean common areas
- Property management policies which allow pets

4. Family-friendly amenities are needed at the neighborhood level as well, including daycare, grocery stores, libraries, parks and other features within easy walking distance.

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<sup>22</sup> The 2011 Community Preference Survey, National Association of Realtors, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Mayor Newsom's Policy Council on Children, Youth and Families. Discussion Brief: Housing for Families with Children in San Francisco. [http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/downloads/ctcf\\_natl\\_sanfran.pdf](http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/downloads/ctcf_natl_sanfran.pdf)

**Experience from Other Cities: San Francisco**

“The housing dilemma for San Francisco families is one of suitability as well as affordability. According to the 2000 Census, almost half (46%) of the housing stock in San Francisco at that time was in studios and one bedroom apartments. The housing boom between 2001-2004 did little to address this. The planning department reports that “studios and one-bedrooms dominate new construction”. Further, single family homes, still a cherished goal for many families with children, are a small percentage of the entire housing stock (32%). That the city’s families migrated towards neighborhoods with a greater percentage of single family homes, as well as emigrating to cities with greater numbers of single family homes, suggests that some families leave the city to attain this goal.

**“Provide a minimum of 20% of family-friendly housing”**

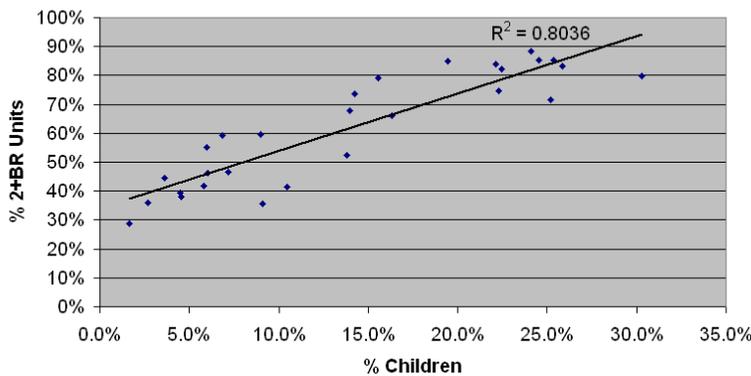
**-- Families and children task force recommendation, San Francisco**

“However, San Francisco families can and do thrive in multi-family properties in every neighborhood in the city. One need only sit in Washington Square Park for an afternoon to see the many families with children enjoying a densely populated neighborhood that contains predominantly multi-unit properties. Further, the demand for family

friendly, affordable units is clearly evident. A development offering such units is Rich Sorro Commons, opened in 2002 in a downtown area, across from SBC Park. The development offers 39 two bedroom apartments, 34 three bedroom apartments, and 11 four bedroom apartments. Rich Sorro Commons features family friendly amenities such as a tot lot, teen center, plenty of open common space, and a computer education center. The development also includes a 3,300 square foot child care center. 2700 people applied for 100 units.”

Bedrooms matter. A study of eight US cities by Sustainable Neighborhoods - Austin, Boston, Dallas, New York City, Portland, Raleigh, San Francisco and Seattle - found a medium to strong correlation between children and multi-bedroom units. For 211 zip code areas in these cities where children exceeded 18%, the average weight of multi-bedroom units was 78%. If availability of multi-bedroom units is truly a hard constraint on child-friendliness, then it exposes the futility of achieving age balance in places like Downtown. The best that can be hoped for is to carve out child-friendly niches, as in Vancouver.

**Boston: % Children vs % 2+BR Housing**



**Figure 21: An SN study of 28 zip codes in Boston. For each zip code, the x-axis shows the percentage of children, and the y-axis shows the percentage of households with more than one bedroom. The average R<sup>2</sup> correlation for eight US cities studied was .63.**

Outdoor playspace – both hardscape and softscape - is also important. A report by the City of Austin Families and Children Task Force states: “Children need access to private or nearby public pathways for biking and running around. Children also need access to complex play features beyond simple play units that have just one obvious use.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> City of Austin Families and Children Task Force Report, 2008. p 8.

**Recommendation #9: In the outer zones of transit centers, rezone both single family and VMU to medium-density housing**

The City's vision for density on transit corridors – VMU low-rise mixed use apartments at most locations – has numerous drawbacks. Demographically, it targets wealthy singles with different needs than families and seniors. VMUs are typically 80-90% efficiency and one-bedroom units that permanently exclude households with children. VMU itself is not an affordable housing category. Per Figure 8, it is 70% more expensive per square foot than a single family house in the suburbs. VMU can draw retail leading to cultural conflicts with adjacent families and seniors. Finally, higher density housing sited further from quality transit will generate more car trips.

**Figure 22: Family size by housing type, Austin, Census data ACS 2009**

Housing Type	People per unit
Single Family	2.72
Duplex, Triplex, Fourplex	2.55
Multifamily	1.93

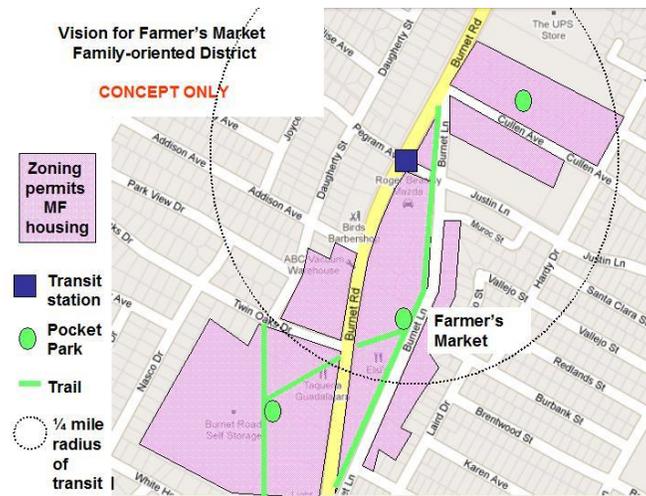
All of these impacts can be softened by treating places on the periphery of a transit station as transitional zones. The medium density housing is affordable, family-friendly, and results in fewer car trips. These zones should include areas that are currently single-family housing, for mostly the same reasons.

Figure 22 gives some indication of the likely popularity of different housing types for

families. Unsurprisingly, single family houses top the list. But duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes do surprisingly well, with an average household size of 2.55 persons.

**Recommendation #10: Encourage more child-friendly housing near schools, libraries and grocery stores**

In 2010, Austin Independent School District floated a plan to close eight underutilized schools, mainly in urban areas that continue to lose children. Lamar Middle School was at risk of closure. The school has capacity for 1,000 students, and requires at least 700 to remain open. To meet this level, students were bused in from disadvantaged areas in East Austin. The school's academic rating dropped to unacceptable, driving away even more local students. By 2009-2010, the school's population was around 630. Only 110 students lived within a mile of the school, and less than half lived within 2 miles. At this level, the school had to let go of staff, reducing the number of electives and making the school even less competitive vs. better-populated peers.



**Figure 23: The 50-acre Farmer's Market district on Burnet Rd is split by a 5-lane highway, has space for only a few walkable destinations, and is fraught with compatibility issues. Half the district is beyond walking distance of transit. But it is adjacent to Lamar Middle School.**

Figure 23 shows the 50-acre Farmer's Market district on Burnet north of 2222. Half the district is more than a quarter mile from where CapMetro is planning rapid transit. There is no major

intersection to further improve transit quality. By treating most of this district as a transitional zone and encouraging more affordable and family-friendly housing categories at an average density of 15 units per acre, about 750 homes could be added. If half of these were occupied by families with children, that would add 50-60 more students to Lamar. A family-oriented transitional zone around the Burnet-2222 intersection would add even more students, greatly reducing the risk of the school's eventual closure.

***Recommendation #11: Transitional zones on the corridor itself should have buffering from the road to ensure safer, less stressful places for children***

No feature better illustrates the child-hostile nature of the City's existing approach to transit corridors in early suburbs than the 12' to 15' sidewalk zone described in the Commercial Design Standards/Vertical Mixed Use ordinance. It's hard to imagine children living and playing in such a narrow zone, right next to where 30,000 cars a day are passing by at 30-40 miles per hour.

As noted in Recommendation #3, corridor segments are poorly supported by quality transit and destinations. That makes them a smart place to put medium-density residential housing oriented towards families or seniors, most of whom prefer to drive.

Several design features are required to make such places safe and attractive for families with children. The main feature is adequate buffering of residential private space from the noise and public space along the street. Buffering elements include landscape building setbacks, decorative edge yard fencing or retaining walls, public sidewalk, landscape planting strip, and curbside parking. For small lots with limited setback potential, other buffering devices include raising the ground level residences up above the sight lines of people on the sidewalk, and the addition of porches or stoops to the building frontage.<sup>25</sup> This approach also makes extensive use of alleys, both for vehicle access but also for child-oriented playspace arranged well away from the arterial.



**Figure 24. A neighborhood-oriented vision for corridor segments: At the boulevard, “mansion-scale” homes and workplace buildings mix compatibly due to similar scale and style. To the rear, alleyway circulation to locate parking, leaving the streets and home frontages safer and more attractive.**<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Freedman, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Freedman, 26, from Brentwood Corridor Specific Plan, City of Brentwood, California.

## Principle #4 – Use Parks & Trails to Connect People, Places

Function should determine placement of open space. Urban planners sometimes use the space of ancient Greek city states – the agora (market) and acropolis (civic district) – to distinguish between busy space and relaxed space. The agora is a bustling place of commerce at the center of the district, connecting many destinations. Transit plazas serve this function. While still accessible, the acropolis is set away from the hustle and bustle. It is a place of civic or spiritual contemplation, or a safe area for child's play. Parks are an example.

What many fail to realize is the strong potential for park space to provide connectivity. Pocket parks arranged along trails leading into the heart of a transit center can greatly encourage people to get out on foot or bike. Trips to the store become part of the daily exercise routine. Playscapes along the way to the transit station keep kids occupied; benches give seniors a respite.

Smart arrangement of parks and trails leading from apartments to retail hubs also greatly increase the likelihood of casual friendly encounters between people,

***Recommendation #12: Implement the City's recommendation to provide pocket parks within ¼ mile of residences in the urban core. Parks should be within 1/8 mile of residences in areas with a high ratio of multi-family housing. Such areas should get priority for new park acquisition***

The City has rightly made a commitment to obtain pocket parks within ¼ mile of all residences in the urban core. This is a minimum standard. Many other cities have set goals or achieved more fine-grained open space metrics. Service areas of just 1/8 mile are important for certain higher density areas, like village centers. At a major intersection, each corner of the intersection with significant density should be treated as its own district for park support.

***Recommendation #13: Locate urban parks in the “Goldilocks Zone” – not right on busy streets, and not away from densely populated areas.***

In the context of transit centers, pocket parks are best located in medium-density “transitional zones.” This is also the right place for family-friendly housing. This critical part of a mixed use district is what astronomers might call a “Goldilocks Zone” (not too hot and not

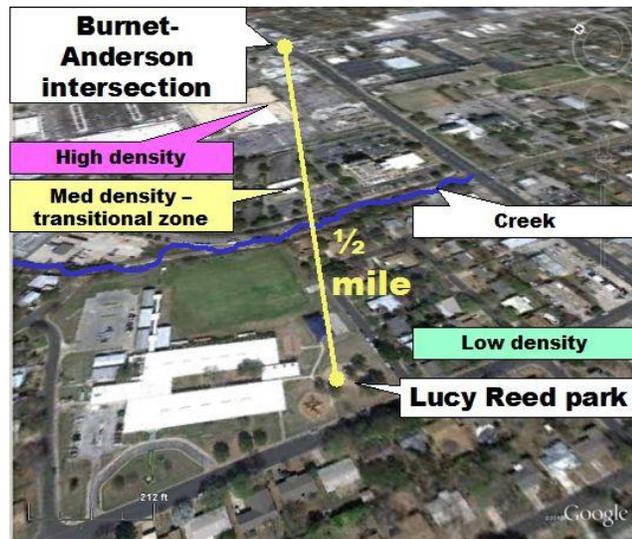
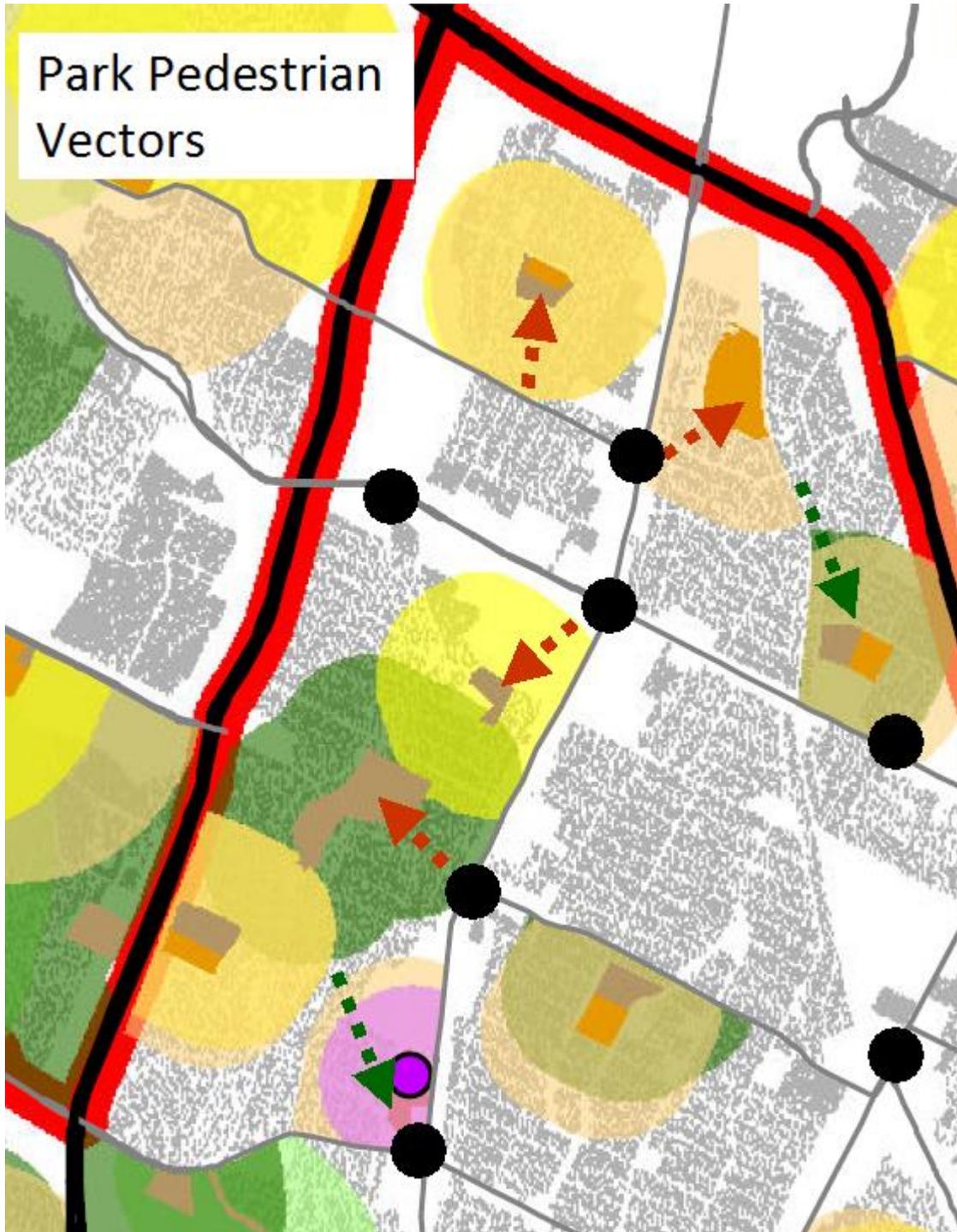


Figure 25. Per the City of Austin guidelines for parks within ¼ mile of every residence, Lucy Reed park near Northcross Mall would count as parkspace for part of the Northcross mixed use center. But it ranks poorly for Access, Uses and Sociability compared to a park in a transition zone north of the creek. Most people would have to walk away from transit, retail and well-populated areas to reach it.

too cold for life.) In urban terms, the pocket park should be far enough from the busy street to be safe from traffic, but no so far that the area is often underpopulated.



**Figure 26** – Park location influences whether people walk towards transit and destinations, or away from them. Many of the potential pocket parks identified for North Central Austin would draw people into the lightly-populated interiors of existing neighborhoods, away from transit and destinations.

Pocket parks located beyond the transitional zone, in the low-density part of the residential neighborhood, are harder to maintain. The closest residents already have backyards that functionally overlap with the park. They don't need it and don't have as big an incentive to maintain it. Such spaces if not properly maintained can become eyesores.



Figure 27. Project for Public Spaces (PPS) matrix showing features that shape a successful public space.

**ACCESS:** Parks in early suburban areas should not only be accessible, but located so as to encourage people to go in the direction of other destinations. The park itself may be a pleasant “accidental destination” en route to the grocery store.

**SOCIABILITY:** The park’s value in sustaining social networks will depend on how many people live nearby, at what times during the day they are around, and how likely they are to use the features of the public space.

**USES:** Many activities that define a successful space are not in the space itself, but adjacent to it. Parks near other destinations have more value.

**COMFORT:** Again, partly defined by usage throughout the day. Does it really make sense to try to “activate” a small space in a low-density neighborhood, the value of which is largely measured in privacy and tranquility?

If the park is still within walking distance of the higher density areas, it will pull a trickle of people to it. That may not be enough to assure a continuous presence of people on the street. Without enough people on the street, an isolated park may end up disturbing adjacent residents who prize two of the chief benefits of single-family neighborhoods – privacy and tranquility.

Conversely, locating the park in a transitional zone has several advantages. It draws people out of the neighborhood on foot or bike, to transit and retail. Because there are more people in the transitional zone, the park is always populated and therefore safe. Park utilization is off the charts. People who live in multi-family housing and who don't have their own yards will value the park, and will be more likely to help maintain it. People from the adjacent single-family neighborhoods will benefit from it as well, without having to worry about risks.

***Recommendation #14: Make sure the City's master trails plan covers the smaller creeks (ditches, really) that run through Austin's early suburbs, especially within mixed use districts.***

**Conservation and Environment Action #15:** Expand Austin's acquisition of environmentally significant land, conservation easements, and/or development rights for the protection of sensitive areas.

**City Facilities & Services Action #9:** Create a trails master plan to ensure connectivity and provide consistency with regional, city and neighborhood level trail and transportation goals. These goals should include providing pedestrian and bicycle connections between neighborhoods and destinations, incorporating trails throughout the city and region, and using protected land along creeks and floodplains in an environmentally sustainable way.

**City Facilities & Services Action #43:** Maintain and expand water quality regulations to protect recharge zones, floodplains, creeks and their headwaters, and other environmentally sensitive areas:

- Increased buffers and setbacks
- Restricted land uses with significant spill risks in sensitive environmental areas
- Changes in allowed impervious cover.

**Conservation & Environment Action #23:** Strengthen regulations that protect creeks and floodplains from development by increasing buffer zones and reducing the amount and type of development allowed in these areas.

**Children, Families & Education Policy #29.** Create public spaces that attract and engage children and serve as gathering places for children and families.

The Comprehensive Plan says we will "Integrate nature into our city". This is critical for early suburbs, where open space is sharply lower than in other parts of the city.

Despite great language in the Comprehensive Plan, the tea leaves from City Hall suggest little appetite for tackling North Austin's open space gap.

A Comp Plan forum on open space held in July 2011 emphasized acquisition of at risk existing open space on the outskirts of the city to protect water quality. When asked to discuss the balance between protecting water quality vs. restoring natural habitat to densely populated areas in the City's core, Mike Kelly from Watershed Protection was blunt: "You won't get a lot of new open space in the City core."

One can quantify Kelly's statement. The 2012 bond package including \$30 million for open space acquisition on the City's outskirts, but just \$4 million for acquisition of urban park space.

This is consistent with open space policies being implemented by Travis County. The County in November 2011 submitted an \$82 million bond package that will buy land on the outskirts of the City. But in 2007, the County sold its property at the Farmer's Market on Burnet Rd – the only available open space for a 40-acre mixed use district.

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The City's Parks Long Range Plan shows an ambitious trail plan, none of which extends into the planned mixed use areas of North Central Austin (See Map 2).

But there is hope, with Watershed Protection working on a new creeks and trails master plan that may apply to smaller creeks. Also, floodplains become a more feasible park opportunity in pedestrian-oriented areas.

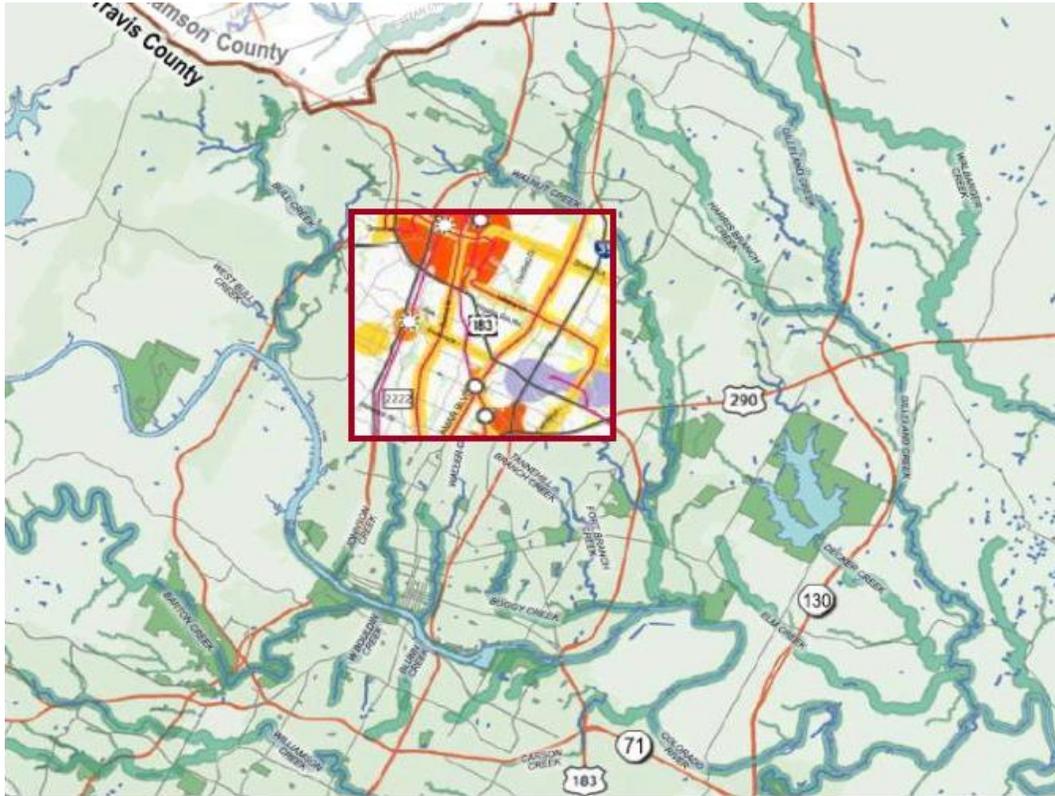


Figure 28. Comprehensive Plan Preferred Growth Scenario for North Central Austin, superimposed onto the Parks master trails plan. There is no plan to invest in creek trails in an area designated for 100,000 future residents. Meanwhile, Travis Co. has actually reduced its open space in this planned growth area.



Figure 29. Downtown: A River Runs Through It.



Figure 30. North Austin: A Highway Runs Through It.

## Principle #5 – Encourage Strong Communities through Long-term Tenancy

Strong geographical communities can have a powerful positive influence on quality of life, including improved public safety, stronger schools, and child safety and support.

The Comprehensive Plan defines a complete community as “human-oriented networks of amenities, transportation, services, and opportunities that fulfill all Austinites’ material, social, and economic needs.”<sup>27</sup> While the Complete Communities matrix highlights the need for civic engagement, it doesn’t appear to make an explicit connection between public policy and reinforcement of local civic engagement.

Public policy can support strong geographical communities, by doing the following:

1. Increasing the number of friendly encounters with neighbors per week
2. Encouraging a strong sense of local identity and culture
3. Achieving balanced demographics, with children a special priority
4. Extending the average duration of residence

People who intend to live a long time in a place have a vested interest in protecting it. US Census data show that owners stay in their residence on average more than three times as long as renters. The ratio is even more pronounced for younger adults.

Figure 31: Median Duration (Years) in Current Residence by Age<sup>28</sup>

Age when moved into current residence	Living in a renter-occupied unit	Living in an owner-occupied unit
15 to 19 years	1.7	4.4
20 to 24 years	1.6	9.3
25 to 29 years	1.9	8.9
30 to 34 years	2.1	8.8
35 to 44 years	2.4	8.7
45 to 64 years	3.1	8.4
65 years and over	4.0	5.2

***Recommendation #15: Encourage property owners or managers to implement policies that increase long-term tenancy, including a balance of owned and leased units, long-term leases, and active marketing to young households with children.***

Renting is usually more affordable than owning. Renting also makes it easier for people who change jobs to change residence, thereby reducing road congestion. To get the best trade-off of community investment vs. affordability and flexibility, a strong mix of owners and renters is preferred. Property managers should be encouraged to introduce condos or apartments that bring the local ratio of owned to rented units closer to 50-50.

Property managers should also be encouraged to offer longer-term lease agreements, and to actively market to households with children.

<sup>27</sup> City of Austin Comprehensive Plan, draft September 2011, p 72. Leinberger uses the term similarly: “More development leads to better communities. More development supports more shops, more transit, more street life, increased property values and taxes.” Leinberger, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 1993. <http://www.census.gov/sipp/p70s/p70-66.pdf>

## Conclusion

Puzzled planners, architects and developers often express frustration that NIMBY neighborhoods won't jump on the bandwagon of vibrant mixed use development. What they miss is the source of pride that neighborhoods have in shaping places for parents to raise their children, and for people to grow old in peace. These are the functions embedded in early suburbs from the time of their formation in the post-WWII Baby Boom. It's in our DNA. Most people who choose to live in early suburbs like children, privacy and tranquility. These traits need to be recognized as marketing strengths.

Shaping urban products that retain some, if not quite all, of suburban privacy and tranquility should be important to environmentalists too. North Central Austin's existing residents have a lot in common with the majority of Americans who live in suburbs farther out. If you want to save the planet, you need to start designing environmentally-friendly urban products that appeal to a much wider segment of the population.

### Three long-term risks for early suburbs undergoing mixed use.

Austin's current policies in the early suburbs come with three long-term risks. The first is that in 30 years, Austin will have a glut of aging singles-oriented housing that is no longer a good fit for the market. The second is that much of this housing along busy, noisy suburban transit corridors will have gotten the bare minimum of outdoor infrastructure needed to shape walkable places. The third risk is that by overbuilding new housing on arterials with fixed vehicle capacity and mediocre transit options, these quasi-walkable environments will be harder to reach. Taken together, these risks will shape places that are uncompetitive, and they will experience urban decay that ripples out to the surrounding areas.

We can minimize these risks with a little foresight. Early suburbs need to buck the trend of building only singles-oriented housing. We can put most new housing in certain places with the best transit, and invest more heavily in strong pedestrian environments there. For the highest risk places farthest from transit and destinations, we'll leverage existing strengths, and shape child- and senior-friendly niches. In so doing, we'll enhance their long-term value and avoid planting the seeds of "Neverlands".

By taking these steps, we ensure that our neighborhoods are sustainable, but also continue to serve their original purpose – as a nurturing, safe, friendly place where children can grow up and all of us can grow old.