




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

THROUGH: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager

FROM: Kimberly A. McNeeley, M. Ed., CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

DATE: December 30, 2022

SUBJECT: Staff Response to Culture and Climate Innovation District – Exploratory Research
(Resolution No. 20210520-062)

This memo serves as a response to [Resolution No. 20210520-062](#) directing the City Manager to work with appropriate City Departments to explore the creation of a City Cultural and Climate Innovation District (CCID) for the South Shore/Barton Springs area including Butler Shores and surrounding South Austin cultural assets, by creating a plan and timeline inclusive of: inventory of assets and strategies to protect and enhance assets; diagnostic analysis; traffic impact analysis; bicycle/multimodal transportation strategies, and; outline of the community engagement process to support its creation.

In a [memo](#) sent to Mayor and City Council on November 3, 2021, the Parks and Recreation Department (Department) advised that while it may be able to absorb some components to assist in operationalizing the directive, it did not have sufficient resources or capacity to complete the plan for a City Cultural and Climate Innovation District. As a first step, the Department proposed the hiring of a consultant to convene a group of essential stakeholders to establish the organizational framework for the District. This initial step provided stakeholders the opportunity to discuss and establish as framework they could lead, participate in, and contribute to.

The attached report details the consultant's findings through the stakeholder engagement process. Many participants desired greater clarity about the purpose and goals of the CCID. Many expressed an appreciation for the aspirational aims of this effort but felt that the initiative as currently described was too broad or trying to accomplish too much. There were also questions regarding what structure the CCID would take, how it would be funded, what regulating authority it would have, how it would work with existing plans and regulations, and what requirements it would place on participating entities.

The Department feels that this stakeholder engagement process was beneficial for identifying the scope of a future CCID but recommends the process of creating a CCID not move forward until the Zilker Park Vision Plan is approved by Council, and until the City produces guidelines for how these kinds of special districts should be managed more broadly.

More information on the community engagement process can be found on the [project webpage](#). Feel free to reach out to my office with any questions, (512) 974-6717.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Jodi Jay, M.B.A., CPRP, Assistant Director
Liana Kallivoka, PhD, PE, LEED Fellow, Assistant Director
Lucas Massie, M.Ed., CPRP, Assistant Director
Suzanne Piper, DBA, Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments

Culture and Climate Innovation District Report

CITY OF AUSTIN PARKS & RECREATION DEPARTMENT CULTURAL & CLIMATE INNOVATION DISTRICT (CCID) FINAL REPORT

Background & Purpose of a Cultural and Climate Innovation District

Per Austin City Council direction, the City of Austin Parks & Recreation Department (PARD) is exploring the creation of a Cultural and Climate Innovation District (CCID) for the South Shore/Barton Springs area including Butler Shores and surrounding South Austin cultural assets. Due to the myriad of important environmental and cultural assets located in this area, the City Council is seeking to understand what kind of framework would help protect this area's ecological assets, accelerate the innovative work already underway, and elevate and celebrate the values of this area, including arts, environment, and climate.

As the Butler Shores Area's commercial and residential development expands and grows, so does the population of residents and the demand for mobility options. Growth is placing stress on the natural environment and is having a significant impact on the green spaces that Austin relies on to thrive as a community. The area's cultural assets have never received a coordinated and comprehensive assessment to address the area's competing needs or leverage the public investments to full effect.

An Innovation District would explore and analyze these conditions and recommend planning to address the area's rapid transition due to private development, public investments for the Dougherty Arts Center, transportation and mobility, and increasing population and density demands. It would provide an ongoing organizational structure and a framework for these cultural and environmental assets to move forward in time. The goal for the proposed district is to leverage the cultural and park/ecological assets to coordinate activities, educate and entertain visitors, advance climate change resilience, and protect and preserve the district's assets.

As a first step, this exploratory process convened a group of essential stakeholders to understand the dynamics, interests, values and needs in the area. The effort sought to be inclusive of stakeholder perspectives and understand what people that live, work and play in the area consider important and what needs to be protected. This input informs a framework for how the district could best leverage the value of these assets in supportive ways to the benefit of the broader community and environment for subsequent planning steps.

Some stakeholders have been involved in prior and current planning processes and raised concerns about how the CCID process would intersect with those efforts, specifically the Zilker Metropolitan Park Vision Plan. It is important to note that this was a preliminary exploration into the creation of an Innovation District, and no official process for its creation would move forward before the Zilker Park Vision Plan is completed. Furthermore, the Economic Development Department is currently conducting work to further define special districts with work scheduled to be complete in 2023.

Stakeholder Outreach Goals and Process

The stakeholder engagement process began with an inclusive, open-ended conversation about creating an Innovation District. Through this exploration, PARD aimed to gain a deeper understanding of people's values, what they think is important, and what should be protected and enhanced. Gathering feedback from stakeholders representing different perspectives, backgrounds and interests provided important insights into key elements of a district framework and how future efforts should move forward.

This engagement process had four key goals:

1. Determine the level of interest in creating a Culture and Climate Innovation District;

2. Explore boundaries/assets to be included of Culture and Climate Innovation District;
3. Explore the values/objectives of a Culture and Climate Innovation District;
4. Explore actions needed to initiate the creation of a Culture and Climate Innovation District.

Outreach was conducted to over 300 area stakeholders, including neighborhoods, community and civic organizations, cultural arts organizations and businesses. Outreach efforts included email blasts, phone calls and a page on the City's website to share information and encourage stakeholders to participate in meetings and a survey. Following each engagement meeting, the presentation material and video recording were shared on the project webpage.

Engagement opportunities were designed to provide a variety of settings and methods for gathering stakeholder input. This included three stakeholder engagement meetings, three focus group meetings, several individual interviews, and an online survey. Details of these engagement methods are as follows:

Stakeholder Meeting #1

September 14, 2022 (Via Zoom)

22 Registrants / 14 Participants

Purpose: Raise awareness of the project's objectives and timeline, share information about what is at stake and how an innovation district might offer a framework to address the changing conditions, and promote opportunities for stakeholder involvement.

Survey

Via SurveyMonkey

September 14 – October 7

21 Respondents

Purpose: Gather input on concerns on key topics, level of interest in creating an Innovation District, what boundaries/assets should be included, and what values, opportunities and actions should inform the process.

Focus Group Meetings

September 22 & 23, 2022 (Via Zoom)

18 Registrants / 12 Participants

Purpose: Conduct interactive stakeholder discussions and gather feedback on the questions being addressed in this process, which are identifying boundaries and assets to be included, understanding critical values and objectives, and assessing the level of interest and actions needed to move forward.

Stakeholder Meeting #2

October 7, 2022 (Via Zoom)

17 Registrants / 15 Participants

Purpose: Review the initial findings from the survey, stakeholder meeting #1 and focus groups, discuss reactions to findings and identify any additional considerations for informing the Innovation District process and framework.

Individual Interviews

October 4, 12, 17 (Via Phone)

4 Registrants / 3 Participants

Purpose: Conduct additional input gathering on project objectives with stakeholders who may not have been able to participate in stakeholder or focus group meetings.

Stakeholder Meeting #3

October 26, 2022 (Via Zoom)

14 Registrants / 10 Participants

Purpose: Provide stakeholders with an initial framework for the Innovation District and gather feedback on how well the framework will meet the area and stakeholders' needs.

Innovation Ecosystem Framework

Innovation districts have emerged as a tool for communities to solve complex challenges and leverage their unique assets. PARD conducted research to understand the attributes that similar innovation districts share, the needs and challenges in the Butler Shores area, and how best to structure a community conversation about an innovation district.

A key to the success of innovation districts is a willingness to observe, experiment with, and elevate what is great about the place, where relationships are built, and ideas are germinated. Generally, innovation districts rely on three components, which experts in the field refer to as an innovation ecosystem. The three components of the innovation ecosystem are as follows:

- **Cultural**
The public and private institutions, organizations and companies that drive, cultivate or support the Butler Shores Area's innovation-rich environment.
- **Physical**
The public and privately-owned spaces—buildings, open spaces, streets and other infrastructure—designed and organized to stimulate new and higher levels of connectivity, collaboration, and innovation. Neighborhood-building amenities provide important services to residents and workers in the district. This can include places such as medical offices, grocery stores, restaurants, coffee bars, small hotels, and local retail (i.e., bookstores, clothing stores, and sports shops).
- **Social/Network**
The relationships between actors—such as between individuals, firms, and institutions—that have the potential to generate, sharpen, and/or accelerate the advancement of ideas. This is a critical component that will facilitate and nurture innovation between the residents (commercial and residential).

The guiding principle of this Culture and Climate Innovation District is “to elevate and celebrate the values of the Butler Shore Area, including arts, environment and climate”. An Innovation District would provide an ongoing organizational structure and a framework for these cultural and environmental assets to move forward in time. Research suggests that for an Innovation District process to be successful, it will:

- be led by community leaders,
- define cultural identity,
- develop strategies to foster the co-existence of cultural programming and environmental sensitivity,
- develop strategies to enhance and protect both built and environmental assets, mobility and access innovations, and opportunities for cross-disciplinary interpretation.

The input gathered from the stakeholder engagement process has been organized into the three innovation ecosystem components (Cultural, Physical and Social/Network). Stakeholders expressed their expectations

related to the areas of cultural innovation and climate innovation. In addition, they raised issues related to transportation and stressed the importance of effectively addressing mobility in the area. A recap of their input in these realms is included as well.

Cultural

The first component is the cultural component and represents the residents and the entities that are within the district, as well as those that have important interests or serve as a bridge to the area. The list below is partial and growing list of those public and private institutions:

Public and Private Institutions

- ADAPT of Texas
- Alliance Children's Garden
- Altas Café
- Austin Lyric Opera
- Austin Nature and Science Center
- Austin Neighborhood Council
- Austin Sierra Club
- Austin Sunshine Camp
- Austin Tri Cyclist
- Austin Parks Foundation
- Baby Acapulco
- Babylon Healthcare Plc
- Barkin' Creek Dog Kitchen-Bath
- Barking Hound Village
- Barton Hills Neighborhood Association
- Barton Hills Park Place
- Barton Springs Bike Rental
- Barton Springs Conservancy
- Barton Springs Pool and Bathhouse
- Barton Springs Saloon
- Benjamin Beau's Salon
- Black Leaders Collective
- Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association
- Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Plan Contact Team
- Bridges on the Park
- Butler Pitch and Putt
- C3 Presents
- Chuy's
- Dougherty Arts Center
- El Alma
- Fab Architecture
- Friends of Austin Nature and Science Center
- Friends of Zilker
- Front Steps
- Girls Scout Cabin
- Greater Austin Performing Arts
- Green Mesquite BBQ & More
- Heart O'Texas Orchid Society
- Hillside Theater
- Juiceland
- Juliet Italian Kitchen
- Long Center for the Performing Arts
- McBeth Recreation Center
- Mexican American Cultural Center
- Mobility Justice Coalition
- Movability
- Palmer Events Center
- PUMA
- Rowing Dock
- Save Barton Creek Association
- Save Our Springs
- South Central Coalition
- South First IBIZ District
- Sunshine Camp
- Terry Black's Barbecue
- Texas Rowing Center
- The Trail Foundation
- Trek Bicycle Lamar
- Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum
- Waterloo Disc Club
- WeWork
- ZACH Theatre
- Zilker Boat Rentals
- Zilker Botanical Garden
- Zilker Park Working Group
- Zilker Neighborhood Association
- Zilker Trail of Lights Foundation/Kite Festival Foundation

Considerations:

Participants in this process included individuals representing neighborhood associations, civic and cultural institutions, non-profit organizations, City staff and some businesses. Moving forward, there will be a high expectation to ensure that all vital stakeholders in this area are engaged and informed. For example, further engagement with the business community would be important to understand their perspectives on challenges and opportunities. In addition, a much broader community engagement process would be needed to ensure input is representative of Austin's diverse community members.

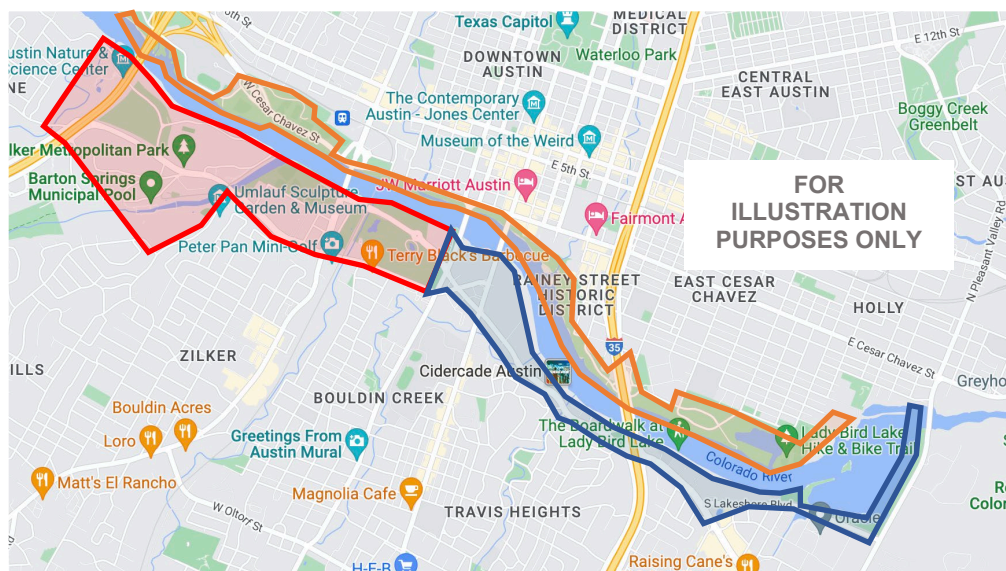
Participant comments:

- *"Really work hard to include the local business owners and their customers."*
- *"Talk to the local artistic companies that use the arts spaces."*
- *"There should be extensive public engagement on the boundary question before asking these questions (because) it really depends what the boundaries are."*
- *"Equity and diversity are important."*

Physical

The second component is the physical area and places that comprise the innovation district. The initial, more conservative boundary developed for the Butler Shores CCID discussion extends from Zilker Nature Preserve on the west, along the Barton Springs corridor, to south First Street on the east. This area includes parks, green spaces and ecologically sensitive areas, including Zilker Park, Barton Springs Pool, Zilker Nature Preserve, Zilker Botanical Gardens, Michael Butler Shores, Vic Matthias Shores, and Auditorium Shores. The area includes cultural assets such as the Zachary Scott Theater, the Daugherty Arts Center, the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum, the Zilker Hillside Theater, the Palmer Events Center and the Long Center. It also includes the businesses and private commercial properties in the area south of Lady Bird Lake along Barton Springs Road.

Through this process, stakeholders were asked to provide input on what boundaries or assets they think should be included in the CCID. The emphasis was on incorporating Lady Bird Lake within the boundary and potentially extending further east, to include the areas such as the Congress Avenue Bridge and Statesman PUD.



- Extend the district further east
- Go all the way to Congress Ave.
- Go all the way to I-35
- Go all the way to Pleasant Valley
- Include Lady Bird Lake
- Include areas all along the river/both sides of the shore and go further east to East Austin.
- Include north side of river along Cesar Chavez to get Seaholm and Library
- Don't include Zilker Park
- Include Congress Ave. Bridge
- Include Statesman PUD

Considerations:

Focusing on this more conservative boundary creates an opportunity to address the unique opportunities and demands in this area, such as mobility issues, retail business and resident needs, protection of critical environmental areas and preservation of green spaces. It also enables the creation of a distinct identity and an acceleration of important cultural, educational, performance and sustainability innovations in the area. Research on successful innovation districts emphasizes the importance of specific and concentrated areas that provide meaningful connection for people and the organizations that make up the area.

A more extended boundary could provide a greater geographic area with revenue-generating potential and additional synergies with entities participating in the district. Tradeoffs of the boundaries of the district will need to be explored in more depth as the process moves forward.

In addition to providing input regarding boundaries, stakeholders expressed their expectations of what the district could do to create a unique sense of place and make it easier to navigate.

Expectations for placemaking include:

- Invest in infrastructure (i.e. streetscape improvements, traffic-taming strategies)
- Ensure area is accessible to people of all abilities
- Increase signage, wayfinding and identification of district
- Make sure these are places for people (passive and recreational use) and that commercial interests don't dominate
- Focus on more passive, neighborhood activities rather than large events and venues that draw large crowds

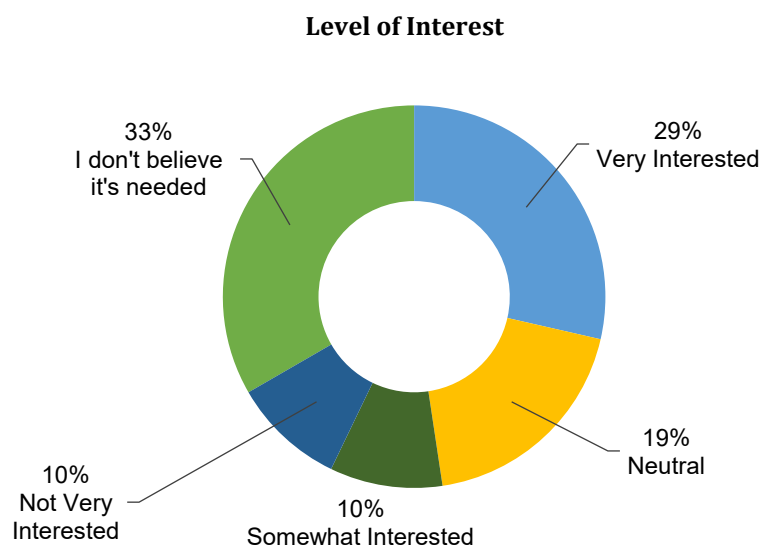
Participant comments:

- *"Include Lady Bird Lake."*
- *"Participate with South Central Waterfront."*
- *"Why would this not extend east beyond the proposed redevelopment of the Statesman site? We need all along this shore to coordinate transportation and mitigate climate change and spread the love, so certain parts of the parks/lake are not loved to death."*
- *"It is appropriate to conduct community engagement prior to formally defining the district boundaries."*

Social / Network

The third ecosystem component is the relationships between individuals, firms, and institutions that can advance and accelerate innovation. This critical component includes the leadership within the district and how entities work together to realize their aims.

An online stakeholder survey asked participants their level of interest in creating a Culture and Climate Innovation District. There were (21) responses to the survey, and as shown in the graph, responses are fairly evenly split between those who are somewhat or very interested, and those who are not very interested or don't believe it is needed. Based on discussions in the stakeholder meetings and focus groups, the level of interest seems dependent on the objectives of the district, how it will operate, and how it will incorporate other planning efforts, such as the Zilker Park Master Plan. Further clarification and definition of the effort may shift how respondents express their level of interest.



Graph represents the 21 responses to the online survey question “*What is your level of interest in creating a Culture and Climate Innovation District for the Butler Shores Area?*”

In addition to providing input regarding level of interest, stakeholders expressed their expectations of what kind of stakeholder and community engagement, and leadership would be needed should the Innovation District move forward.

Expectations for engagement and leadership include:

- Broaden community engagement
- Engage, educate and support local businesses
- Foster coordination and idea exchange among the cultural institutions
- Ensure effort is led by community leaders to foster success and sustainability of district
- Involve the overall community, all the stakeholders and end users

Participant comments:

- *"I don't believe that the CCID should move forward until the Zilker Vision Plan is complete, and I still don't have a clear understanding of the goals and reasons behind creating the CCID."*
- *"It would be important to be led by community leaders, but also involve the overall community, all the stakeholders and end users."*
- *"Without people really having a good understanding of what you're trying to do and what's at stake, it is hard for people to follow that".*
- *"The city has commissioned a Vision Plan for Zilker Park. The CCID should support and accelerate implementation of the Vision Plan."*
- *"If you want to see more support for a CCID, there needs to be a much more robust public engagement to solicit feedback from community members throughout the City of Austin."*

A very important part of what would guide the district and align actions of its diverse participants is a set of shared values. Participants provided their thoughts on the values that should be represented the area and should define any proposed Innovation District.

Defining Values

- Honor and celebrate this area's unique and beloved natural and human heritage
- Protect and foster the wellbeing of the land, the river, plants, animals and people
- Connect people with each other, with nature, and with arts, culture and civic institutions
- Create an accessible and inclusive environment that builds community and reflects our diversity, history and aspirations
- Encourage active stewardship of, and contributions to, the area's health, equity, resiliency and creativity
- Educate people about environmental issues and showcase innovative solutions
- Respect and build on prior and current planning work to ensure community priorities are understood and integrated
- Foster active engagement of, and leadership by, local stakeholders and the broader community

Participant comments:

- *"Maintaining environmental regulations to mitigate climate change in the city. Allowing easy access to parkland and city amenities."*
- *"Climate awareness, education and resiliency, vision, art/ culture intersection with ecological integrity."*
- *"Natural preservation, non-vehicular mobility."*
- *"Human connection to nature including habitat."*
- *"Protecting habitat for wildlife and pollinators. Integrating green energy technology and water conservation practices into new construction and update park infrastructure with same."*

Cultural Innovation

As part of the discussion of values, stakeholders provided input on the types of objectives that the CCID could accomplish that would support those values and add to the area's unique sense of place.

Expectations for Cultural Innovation

- Foster greater coordination between cultural institutions
- Educate people about the culture, heritage and the true history of the area
- Host activation events (music, dance, art) to create an identity and show support
- Build community and bring people together

- Create a place that is accessible and inviting to all people, which includes the programming at cultural centers and the naming of places.
- Storytelling and experiences so people see their communities, their heritage and their cultures reflected
- Create opportunities for people to eat, drink, shop, socialize and experience art
- Make it a "go-to" area that is safe and beautiful

Considerations:

In the cultural realm, there were different perspectives of what "cultural" means. This ranged from the arts to cultural heritage to ethnic identity. This will be an important area to further explore and define, should the Innovation District move forward. Also, some people raised the concern that the needs and objectives of a cultural district may be at odds with that of a climate district. For example, a cultural district will require infrastructure (i.e., parking, sidewalks, ADA accessible features), while a climate district will likely prioritize the preservation of natural areas that are undisturbed. How these tensions are addressed could be at the heart of the innovations highlighted in the area, but fully working through these potential conflicts will be vital to success.

Participant comments:

- *"Art depends on the built environment and the built environment can be impeded by the designation of being an ecological zone."*
- *"There needs to be an event, such as an annual celebration that celebrates music, dance, arts, which also solidifies the identity and name of the district."*
- *"You want people to have that experience where they really feel like they're in an innovation district because it looks different, it feels different, it's supportive."*
- *"We should bring people there and create opportunities for them to eat, drink, shop, socialize and experience art."*

Climate Innovation

Stakeholder input focused a great deal on the environmental and climate resiliency aims of the Innovation District. As they identified the values that should guide the process, they provided insight on the types of objectives that the CCID should include to ensure that the environmental stewardship of the area remains at the center of the district's identity.

Expectations for Climate / Environmental Innovation

- Protection of, and engagement with, Lady Bird Lake
- Educate people about the environment, challenges and climate resilience strategies
- Preserve and restore environment, and protect parkland, habitat and pollinators
- Use sustainable practices in land management, maintenance, operations
- Reduce use of personal autos and enhance bikeways, sidewalks and transit
- Help businesses and institutions adopt more green practices
- Integrate green energy technology and water conservation practices into new construction and park infrastructure
- Implement water quality controls to keep the waterways healthy
- Use storytelling / interpretive experiences to foster learning about people and place
- Spotlight innovative practices and ways Austin is advancing climate resilience
- Create an "Innovation Hub"

Considerations:

Stakeholders felt strongly that the extensive planning that has been done, particularly the Zilker Park Vision Plan, must guide this effort to ensure that environmental priorities are not subordinated to commercial interests. Many participants indicated that a key objective is to educate people about the environment, so that they can become active stewards rather than simply passive consumers. Others focused on the importance of this area's ability to advance climate resilience strategies and to put a spotlight on specific innovations in that realm. Other specifics, such as what expectations will be set for area organizations and businesses around sustainable practices, will need to be addressed as part of further discussions regarding a CCID.

Participant Comments:

- *"It would be great to maintain and expand the park space throughout the waterfront, restore as much of it to park as possible and implement water quality controls to keep the waterways healthy."*
- *"Fundamental to the 'Austin Culture' is connection, respect, and celebration of the environment."*
- *"Environmental restoration and climate change readiness need to be top priorities."*
- *"Environmental education should be at the center."*
- *"We fully intend to get greener and greener, but we would need support and help."*

Mobility and Transportation

Stakeholders also raised concerns about mobility challenges in the area and the importance of improving transportation, access, and connectivity. Participants mentioned the need to connect this effort with public transit improvements and plans underway, such as Project Connect.

Expectations for mobility include:

- Enhance bikeways, sidewalks and transit service; limit autos
- A transportation mix that includes cars will be needed; address parking
- Ensure area is accessible to people of all abilities
- Create a circulator between the different cultural districts

Considerations:

Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of finding smart ways for people to access the area without taking away from it through increased traffic congestion. Perspectives differ, however, on how to address the implications of automobile traffic, such as the need for increased parking. Many stakeholders indicated support for minimizing auto use and prioritizing transit, bicycles and pedestrian facilities. Others felt that many people would continue to rely on autos when visiting the area and that it would be important to have sufficient parking. Stakeholders hoped that this process would serve as an effective catalyst for innovative transportation solutions that have yet to be realized in previous planning efforts.

Participant Comments:

- *"Better bike lanes and safe bike parking and storage. Access for people who must arrive by car—and pullouts for ride sharing to keep traffic moving."*
- *"Make a plan that reduces traffic and parking within the CCID."*
- *"Mass transit is a part of the solution, however does not address the needs of the majority of people who rely on cars for transportation and to carry coolers, gear, etc. More parking is needed within the park."*

- *“The transportation infrastructure in this area is a critical aspect of planning and Zilker and Butler transportation solutions have to be integrated to be successful.”*
- *“It should be a district that people from all parts of the city are able to access.”*

Actions Needed to Initiate the Creation of an Innovation District

In addition to expectations and considerations for the innovation ecosystem framework, stakeholders explored the question of what actions would be needed to create an Innovation District. Many desired greater clarity about the purpose and goals of the CCID. Some expressed an appreciation for the aspirational aims of this effort but felt that the initiative as currently described was too broad or trying to accomplish too much. Others did not understand the link between the cultural district, which was a concept familiar to some, and the climate district, which was less clearly understood. There was a desire to understand if there were other similar districts that included a large metropolitan park. There were also questions regarding what structure the Innovation District would take, how it would be funded, what regulating authority it would have, how it would work with existing plans and regulations, and what requirements it would place on participating entities.

There were other concerns expressed by participants. This included a desire to understand how potential conflicts between goals of a cultural district and a climate district be handled and how this effort fits into the City’s overall approach to creating districts, which is currently being worked on by the Economic Development Department. Other concerns related to whether the City staff has sufficient time and resources to dedicate to the effort, and if the community members, particularly those involved in the Zilker Vision Plan process, have the bandwidth to take on this effort. Some suggested further exploring lessons learned and best practices, both locally and from other communities, to this effort to understand how those insights could enhance future discussions.