



Code Approach Alternatives and Annotated Outlines Recommendations

9.15.14

ASLA Austin takes the position that the Imagine Austin goals of compact & connected and nature & city are strongly connected for the creation of places that are vibrant, healthy, and meaningful. By creating and implementing a land development code that successfully integrates the built and natural aspects of our environment, the city can better accommodate population growth, manage its resources, and improve the quality of life for all residents.

To achieve this integration, ASLA Austin recommends that the revision of Austin's Land Development Code be informed by "green" code practices and precedents, such as demonstrated in Seattle's Green Factor and Washington, D.C.'s Green Area Ratio, that have been effective for conserving and enhancing the ecosystem services that support community well-being. The role of green aspects of a code are suggested in the recently released CodeNEXT Approach Alternatives & Annotated Outlines report, but greater attention and expanded consideration would provide a platform for better meeting the city's objectives. Specifically, we recognize five interrelated topics in which Austin's next Land Development Code should include these ideas.

1. Water conservation and management

As the city becomes more compact, there is the likelihood that there will be increases in impervious cover—rooftops, plazas, streets, sidewalks—which can, in turn, increase stormwater runoff volumes and velocities. In order to lessen the strain on constructed stormwater infrastructure and not exacerbate the risk of flooding, we recommend:

- Establishing watershed-scale requirements for green infrastructure that include minimum amounts of pervious vegetated cover per watershed and consider future build-out conditions.
- Establishing site-scale minimum performance requirements for water collection.
- Requiring onsite water reuse strategies that involve rainwater, graywater, reclaimed water, stormwater, air conditioning condensate, and all other appropriate sources.
- Incentivizing the absolute reductions in existing impervious cover in re-development with a performance-based approach that gives credit for increasing stormwater retention and groundwater recharge.
- Incorporating water collection and distribution green infrastructure as part of the 'Complete Streets' effort to treat stormwater run-off before it enters creeks and lakes.

2. Urban heat island effects and microclimate modification

Masonry buildings and roads absorb heat and thereby contribute to what is called the urban heat island effect. Glass building facades can also reflect light and contribute to localized higher temperatures. The increased temperatures can discourage pedestrian and bicycle movement. To mitigate these effects and promote outdoor and on-street activity, we recommend:

- Recognizing the importance of a cool, shaded public, and private realm by establishing required minimum performance criteria for microclimate modification—including the preservation of existing shade trees and the use of new shade trees, green walls, shade structures, green roofs, pervious pavement, etc.—to relieve urban heat island effects.

3. Infill regulation

In a city that is becoming more compact and connected, parcels are not only developed, but re-developed. The code should provide instruction on how these transformations can be made. To guide the process, we recommend:

- Encouraging the principles set forth in the Sustainable Sites Initiative, a rating system developed by ASLA, the Lady Bird Wildflower Center of The University of Texas, and the US Botanic Garden.
- Requiring that redevelopment projects (especially in key centers and along major corridors) cluster development in a way that decreases the effective overall impact of impervious cover and, where applicable, enhances groundwater recharge.
- Developing specific and targeted incentives that offset the negative aspects of urban growth—such as increased impervious cover and loss of tree canopy—to maintain neighborhood character and city-wide ecological productivity and integrity.
- Creating standards that are appropriate and customized to development type (i.e. urban infill vs. greenfield; walkable urban, transitional, and drivable suburban.)

4. Urban Agriculture

A necessary feature of a successful compact and connected community is easy access to food. Agriculturally productive parcels—including private gardens, community gardens, and urban agriculture operations—can contribute to the provision of healthy nutritional options across the city. Further, these land uses also contribute to related efforts to live sustainably. For example, they support populations of pollinators and can be used to help manage food waste by providing composting sites. To encourage these benefits, we recommend:

- Incorporating provisions and guidelines in the new code that make urban farms, community gardens, and front- and backyard gardens possible.

5. Compatibility

Increased uses of land in a city that is becoming more compact and connected can result in incompatible (or at least undesired) adjacencies. To mitigate these, we recommend:

- Employing green infrastructure in compatibility setbacks to mitigate impacts of commercial and multifamily zoning on adjacent single-family residential development.

Going forward

A primary consideration for any land development code is that it allows policy intentions to be met. Through its comprehensive plan, the City of Austin has identified a set of objectives that must be balanced carefully and integrated thoughtfully. To help bring about this desired result ASLA Austin recommends:

- Strengthening of the role of specific City entities (including the Office of Sustainability and the Imagine Austin Green Infrastructure Regulatory Team [GIRT]), Boards and Commissions, and other regulatory bodies within the process of forming the new code and in the efficient administration of the code.
- That the groups mentioned in the above item collaborate with the code consultant team in the presentation of a CodeTALK on Nature and the City in Fall of 2014.
- That a key team member, who is a licensed landscape architect in the State of Texas, be designated to ensure that the core green infrastructure and sustainable water priority programs are integrated into the code.

Finally, we recommend that the CodeNEXT process provide a formal mechanism by which ASLA Austin can contribute as an informed stakeholder so that the core nature and city principles adopted in Imagine Austin are carried forward. It is recommended that this partnership continue as the Code evolves to accommodate advances in technology and improvements in technique.