

ASLA Austin | CodeNEXT



Austin needs a visionary, integrated, custom code that recognizes the positive contributions of ecological systems to the qualities of our city’s urban form. Frameworks that maintain and improve our ecological resources should be at the forefront of our future plans to allow Austin to accommodate rapid population growth, strain on infrastructure, and a constantly challenged fresh water supply. The sensitive calibration of Compact and Connected and Nature and City needs to be given serious consideration throughout Austin’s future Community Character policies.

Imagine Austin’s Promise

Imagine Austin, the city’s comprehensive plan completed in 2012, provides a collective strategy for meeting the significant challenges of the 21st century. Implementing the plan will require the coordination of many efforts and among the most important of these is the revision of Austin’s land development code. To achieve the aims of the plan, we highlight three policies that will have broad implications for the relationships between Compact and Connected and Nature and City:

“Integrate citywide and regional green infrastructure to include such elements as preserves and parks, stream corridors, green streets, greenways, and agricultural lands and the trail system into the urban environment and the transportation network.” LUT P23

“Integrate green infrastructure elements such as the urban forest, gardens, green buildings, stormwater treatment and infiltration facilities and green streets into the urban design of the city through “green” development practices and regulations.” LUT P34

“Adopt innovative programs, practices, and technologies to increase environmental quality and sustainability and reduce Austin’s carbon footprint through the conservation of natural resources.” CE P12

Austin’s Cultural Values

Environment, culture, and design are layered in the ways we shape form and density to create urban fabric. The unique Austin culture, which is renowned internationally, is defined by our close connection with nature in the city. This urban-nature cohesion has historically set Austin apart from its bigger brother and sister cities in Texas. Conserving this connection is one of our cultural values. Emphasizing elements that define the city as natural, such as green infrastructure, a healthy urban tree canopy, air quality, and a sustainable water supply will allow Austin to maintain its vitality and encourage a healthy coexistence of humans, flora, and fauna.

Austin’s Environmental Legacy and Future

The features that have made our city so unique, attractive, and livable are the abundance of natural areas integrated into our urban form through the river and creek system, the predominance of tree cover, the emphasis on green infrastructure, and the creativity of our outdoor urban spaces. Public and private access to nature in the heart of the city has time and again proved to be a significant value for Austinites and supports our healthy quality of life. These unique characteristics and our values have contributed to an economic competitive edge by attracting businesses and the talent who desire our lifestyle. As a relatively young city, Austin has the opportunity to establish a progressive, innovative land development code that protects and enhances the natural beauty and the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens. The CodeNEXT Land Development Code rewrite should place the

same importance on Nature and City as it does on Compact and Connected as described in Imagine Austin.

Current CodeNEXT Concerns

ASLA Austin is concerned that certain precedent form-based codes from other cities that focus simply on the built environment and walkability will not provide a framework that is appropriate for Austin's values or its specific environmental challenges—including urban heat island effects, drought, periodic flash floods, and air quality. Austin needs a custom code that combines form-related and environmental interests into one holistic document. Landscape urbanism is a term for organizing the form of the city around its natural patterns and attributes. The form-based code's urban transect can be achieved within the ecological framework of an integrated systems approach. There is an opportunity to adopt the principles of landscape urbanism and allow our city and region to mature and urbanize in a gentler, more respectful way, one that will preserve and enhance our city's natural systems while benefitting the associated urban form.

Need for an Integrated Code Combining Ecological Systems and Urban Form

The code needs to function not only on a policy scale, but also on the detail scale within which design professionals can creatively implement policy intentions.

- The code should be informed by research on "green" codes that integrate nature and the city.
- The code should include performance criteria for ecosystem services that support health, safety and welfare.
- The code should be flexible and allow policy intentions to be met through a balance of environmental concerns and built form.
- The code should work across scales, from zoning regulations to environmental criteria to design guidelines.
- The code should evolve over time by accommodating advances in technology and improvements in technique.

ASLA Austin is ready and willing to help provide an understanding for an ecological systems-based approach to the CodeNEXT process. We propose to provide open forums on specific topics in regional ecology, collaborate with the consultant team and city staff to identify best practices in green codes, support innovative green infrastructure solutions, work with other design and environmental professionals in the development of design guidelines, and provide comments on CodeNEXT documents as they are developed.

We welcome the opportunity to work with our city's code writers to develop the best possible code for Austin's future that honors its environmental legacy.

For Reference:

ImagineAustin Comprehensive Plan. City Council Adopted, June 15, 2012. (Policies LUT P5, 11, 22, 23, 29,30, 33, 34, 35; CE P3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 14; CFS P4, 5, 14; CFS P44, 47; S P25,29; C P16, 17; Priority Programs 1,2, 4, 8; Action Matrix LUT A5, 8,14, 19, 28, 32, 36,37,39, 45; HNA15; CE A3,6,7,10,15,16,22; CFS A3,7,9,10,12,23,25,36,37,38, 39; C A2.)

ImagineAustin 2013 Annual Report. Topic Groups - Compact and Connected, Nature and City, Creativity and Economy, Healthy and Affordable, vii.

Nature and Cities Symposium: Urban Ecological Design and Planning. University of Texas Austin, School of Architecture, 2/28-3/01, 2014. <http://www.soa.utexas.edu/calendar/natureandcities/>

ASLA'S Becoming Greenest: Recommendations for a More Sustainable Washington D.C. Executive Summary.

"Why We Need an Urban Sustainable Development Goal" by Thomas Elmqvist. March 5th, 2014. Sustainable Cities Collective.

The Sustainable Sites Initiative. Collaborative Project by ASLA, US Botanic Garden, The University of Texas at Austin Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. <http://www.wildflower.org>.