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A City With Smarts

Austin Wising Up to Growth Plans

BY MIKE CLARK-MADISON, APRIL 17, 1998, NEWS



illustration by Doug Potter

On May 2, we all (well, maybe one in 10 of us, if the city is lucky) will troop to the polls to ye or nay three very different bond measures. The first would expand the Convention Center and flood-proof Waller Creek; another would buy up thousands of acres over the Edwards Aquifer; the third would put in flood control on a stretch of Walnut Creek in East Austin. A grab bag of public works, right?

Wrong. As the city's leaders and managers are wont to remind us, all three May bond items, and many other city projects both begun and proposed, are part of a big ol' thing called the Smart Growth Initiative. Now, everyone wants to be smart, especially about something as scary and frustrating as "growth," so you couldn't ask for a better catchy label.

But after many, many, many city plans and projects are stitched together into the Smart Growth golem, will they produce a coherent strategy for smarter growth? And as long as the list is, does it cover everything Austin needs if we really want to grow smart? As Smart Growth takes on a life of its own, the answer so far is a resounding "Maybe."

In the Beginning...

Smart Growth is a new name for a lot of old, in some cases ancient, ideas, some of which were actually being pursued and even implemented before being attached to an Initiative-with-a-capital-I (see below for the latest list of Smart Growth's parts). The upshot of most of them is to get growth happening where it will cause the least damage and tumult.

The fountainhead of Smart Growth is Austin Tomorrow, the city's reigning comprehensive plan, if in name only, first adopted (in phases) in the mid-Seventies and roundly ignored during two decades' and two booms' worth of dumb growth. After years of being treated like the crazy relative hiding in the closet, Austin Tomorrow has now emerged as a guiding force in Austin policy, even though the "tomorrow" envisioned by the plan has actually come and gone. "I carried a copy of the Austin Tomorrow plan around for six months on the campaign trail," says Councilmember Bill Spelman. "And people ask, 'Why didn't we follow this? It makes so much sense.'"

Austin Tomorrow's division of Metro Austin into desired and less-desired growth areas has been adopted wholesale - as best as possible, 20 years on - as the skeleton of Smart Growth. In the current version, the city is divided into two, but really three, and probably four, and maybe even five, growth zones (see map).

There's the Drinking Water Protection Zone (DWPZ), comprising the west-of-town watersheds that feed into the river upstream of the first water treatment plant, or that supply water directly. When Smart Growth was officially unveiled at a City Council press conference in February, the rest of our fair city lay within a catch-all Desired Development Zone (DDZ). This has since been refined by adding an "Urban Desired Development Zone" - composed of the city's urban watersheds - onto the Smart Growth map. And it's likely that downtown, along with transit corridors (actual and envisioned) throughout the city, will likewise be carved out as separate zones.



**The Smart Growth Initiative proposes
dividing the Austin area into three key**

zones -- the Drinking Water Protection Zone in the southwest, the Desired Development Zone in east and northeast sectors, and the Urban Desired Development Zone in the heart of the city.

"We want to draw a distinction between inner-city neighborhoods and downtown itself, because there may be different tools and processes that we want to use to guide development," says Assistant City Manager Toby Futrell, the key staff figure in Smart Growth. "We're creating both separate guiding principles - on land use, development incentives, development strategies - for each of these zones, as well as separate processes that govern development."

Back in February, Smart Growth was generally understood (and in some quarters is still understood) as an environmental initiative: Smart Growth = Keep 'Em Off The Aquifer. The use of watersheds as boundaries, and certainly the floating of the purely enviro Proposition 2 (the Barton Creek Buffer land purchases) on the May ballot, only reinforce this sense. But every division of the Desired Development Zone into smaller zones shows that more than Green Machine power is at play.

That doesn't mean Smart Growth is *not* an enviro dream come true, even with the addition of other people's dreams-come-true - like the downtown projects in Proposition 1 - to the Initiative. "It's all part of what the environmentalists have been saying for years," says Councilmember Daryl Slusher. "We'll support downtown development if you stop building over the aquifer." (Slusher, who still voices doubts about the Convention Center expansion, adds "It's ironic that I was the one" - in his prior life as this paper's politics editor - "who originally wanted the *Chronicle* not to endorse the Center.")

But, as Spelman says, "the argument against sprawl" - i.e., dumb growth - "is a lot bigger than just an argument in favor of the environment. An even bigger dimension is the pocketbook argument. Every development we can persuade to move into the city limits is going to be using existing infrastructure and saving lots of tax money. And we'll be increasing density to the levels we need to make transit work, reducing traffic, and bringing jobs into the city."

This vision highlights the fact that the Urban DDZ is the Really DDZ: The Smart Growth ideal is urban infill and our long-touted compact city. That's led to another Smart Growth sub-initiative, the rewriting of Austin's Land Development Code, a task that will engage many city employees, as well as a 21-member Smart Growth Focus Group, through the end of the city's fiscal year in September.

"If we say we don't want intense urban development in one area but do want it somewhere else, we don't want people to get to that area and then run into a morass of legal roadblocks," says Slusher. "We've identified Central and East Austin as our desired development zone since the 1970s, and if we ended up with simply two sections of the code - one for the DDZ and one for everything else - that would be less than we have now."

Actually, the current Land Development Code has - at last count, since it changes seemingly every week - 999 different sections. And since the Focus Group *et al.*'s charge is to create a "plain English" version of the code, rewriting it ain't no small thing, given that the current code includes language like: "Development shall require a temporary erosion and sedimentation control plan and water quality plan certified by a registered professional engineer and approved by the Environmental and Conservation Services Department which will control off-site sedimentation during the construction of the project by temporary structural controls, site management practices, or other approved methods until permanent revegetation is certified complete."

Retooling History

Can rewriting the LDC, and in the process simplifying Austin's convoluted and slow-ass planning-and-development process, and creating a document that embraces and explains the Smart Growth zones and goals, all be done before October 1? Probably not, despite the Council's oft-cited (especially by the mayor) chutzpah in setting such an ambitious deadline.

"We're pulling out the handful of things - a dozen or so - that we *need* to change the most, to get the biggest bang for the buck," says Futrell of the work of the Focus Group. "It won't be a complete, line-by-line review of the entire process. But those dozen things will be in place and implemented by the end of the fiscal year."

Rewriting the cumbersome LDC, and re-engineering the development process, is likewise not a new idea. It was attempted back in the late Eighties with the Austinplan process, which proved to be equally cumbersome and ended up collapsing under its own weight. It was also a major talking point of the Citizens Planning Committee, whose work led to the creation of the neighborhood-planning program last year, as well as to the addition of about 60 of those 999 sections in the form of the city's Traditional Neighborhood District (TND) ordinance. Both of those items have retroactively become part of Smart Growth.

The proposed followup to the TND, a citywide infill ordinance, was already in the pipeline before being folded into the Smart Growth Initiative. "Tracy Watson [the city's development-process manager and author of the TND ordinance] will have, by September, identified the key elements that keep infill from happening, the big things that keep us from moving ahead," says Futrell. "That doesn't mean he won't keep working on the detailed ordinance, but that may have taken us years. Now it will take months."

In fact, there are so many old ideas floating around, and plans on the table and on shelves, that play into the Smart Growth concept that part of the Initiative is simply sorting them out. The city has hired back Austin Librach, former director of the old Environmental and Conservation Services Department, as an assistant planning director - just to, in Futrell's words, "pull all of our plans together, coordinate them, and look for the conflicts between them."

"I have no intention of this being a three-year, labor-intensive, mind-boggling process," Futrell continues, referring to Austinplan. "This is about taking good, hard, old work that's laying on shelves, pulling out the best of it, and implementing it, and taking those things that are creating conflict between different functions of the city and resolving those conflicts. We've got a lot of smart people who've done good work; I just want to see it in place. By September, much of it will be."

So is there anything that isn't now part of Smart Growth? Well, yeah, and they include a couple of things that don't exist, and may never exist, but which if they did exist would certainly help Austin grow smarter. One is a real comprehensive plan, more current and more detailed than Austin Tomorrow, but not overcooked like Austinplan. Don't hold your breath waiting for a city-wide planning effort, although the Smart Growth players agree with Citizens Planning Committee chair Ben Heimsath's description of the neighborhood-planning project as "master planning through the back door."

"We don't have a comprehensive plan," says Spelman, "and it would be nice if we did, but we're working toward one, and the neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach is the only way we'll have one. What we're looking to do now is create a way where we can apply community values appropriately at the beginning of the development process. Neighborhood plans make it much easier to do that."

Another need is some sort of incentive package to prime the pump for infill development in the Urban DDZ. "To move people where we *really* want them to be, we're probably talking about some sort of incentives," says Spelman. "I think this [Smart Growth Focus Group] is the logical group to come to grips with that, but it may be too big for us to handle."

The flip side of that missing plank is a strategy to limit unbridled suburban growth in *any* development zone, since sprawl is still sprawl, at any distance from the Edwards Aquifer. "I think transit can play a key role in keeping the DDZ from turning into sprawl," says Slusher, "and we need to be looking at real incentives for infill, like tax breaks for redevelopment. But if growth continues at the pace it's at now, I don't think infill is going to be enough. We need growth on the edge, as long as it's within the city limits and built according to the wisdom of Austin Tomorrow and the plans since."

To have good and dense development in the DDZs will require long-term investments in new infrastructure. Council and staff now must grapple with how to pay for new roads, sewers, utilities, and civic spaces in the Smart Growth target areas - and how, or whether, to provide this infrastructure elsewhere. "In the [proposed] September bond package, 80-90% of the infrastructure investment goes into the DDZ," says Futrell. "But we need to resolve the question of how and where to extend utility service. We don't yet know how, if you're a developer and come to the city for an agreement on water and wastewater service, that fits into Smart Growth and each of the zones."

Spelman notes that "We need to provide quality urban services if we want to lure people in. Everyone expects city government to be inefficient, so we need to work twice as hard to prove that we can compete. That was crystal-clear through the annexation process; people raised reasonable questions about their wastewater and sanitation service. We need to be in a position where people are beating down our doors saying, 'Please annex us.'"

Which highlights the final nonexistent element that would, if it existed, secure the success of Smart Growth: A regional development plan. Previous efforts to simply limit the city's utility service area foundered on the fact that other utility providers - such as LCRA or TU Electric - are more than happy to serve the areas we ignore. The same dynamic ultimately applies to all of Smart Growth: Nothing within the whole vast package will stop the surrounding towns and counties from allowing any mode of development they please.

Things seem to be getting better in this regard, but ultimately Smart Growth is a competitive, rather than cooperative, gesture on the City of Austin's part. The idea is to make the city so attractive, user-friendly, and well-planned that the broad class of citizens would live and build within, rather than beyond, the DDZ limits. That hasn't been the case for a while, and the Initiative seems to suggest that it's the city itself that has not been too smart. "Developers tell us all the time that it's so hard to do business with the city," says Spelman. "We want to make it just easy enough to do the right thing, and just hard enough to do the wrong thing, so people will voluntarily do the right thing."



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