

# CONGRESS FOR THE NEW URBANISM

## CENTRAL TEXAS CHAPTER

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February 21, 2012

From: Board of Directors, The Congress for The New Urbanism - Central Texas Chapter

To: Citizens Advisory Task Force, Comprehensive Plan  
City of Austin Planning Commissioners  
Garner Stoll, Assistant Director, Planning & Development Review, City of Austin

Re: Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan — Comments and Suggested Revisions

Dear Friends:

The Congress for The New Urbanism - Central Texas Chapter (CNU-CTX), its Austin members and many followers, have followed the Imagine Austin Comprehensive plan process with great interest. We wish to express our heartfelt thanks for the countless unpaid hours that our fellow citizens, especially the hard-working volunteers on the Citizens' Advisory Task Force and Planning Commission, have devoted to this plan.

Our organization is an enthusiastic supporter of plan adoption. Specifically, we represent a large contingent of Austinites who champion the core principle "Grow as a compact, connected city." This is vital for Austin's future; the principle speaks to the heart of our CNU Charter. We believe that implementing this principle -- through the Centers and Complete Communities concepts -- is the path forward that will allow Austin to realize all the other goals in the plan. We also see as critical a revision of the land development code to allow more compact, connected development patterns to occur.

In reviewing the most recent draft of the plan, released last week, we noted that the implementation language in Chapter Five related to this principle -- e.g. "Invest in a compact, connected city" and all the priority actions which derive from it -- still needs to be substantially strengthened. The language in the plan does not adequately convey the recommended development patterns for Austin's future -- concentrated in Centers -- pictured in the maps. The maps need to be supported by explicit language in this section of the plan. We fully realize that this process has been long and arduous, and that everyone would like to be done editing the draft and move forward toward plan adoption. But we believe it would be a contrary to the public interest to get this close to a strong plan for a more sustainable future for Austin and not carry the crucial "compact and connected" ball across the finish line. It is now critical, before the plan leaves the task force, that this section of the plan be fully detailed, clarified, and strongly stated, in order to ensure that the IACP's specific language about Priority Actions robustly and vigorously supports the compact-and-connected principle.

Specifically, we recommend new or revised language to:

- Require updates to Austin's land development regulations and processes to ensure they do not interfere with comprehensive plan implementation, and specifically to support Austin's evolution as a compact and connected city. We must revise our land development regulations to reduce the expense and time for constructing infill housing to support our community's goal of becoming a City of Complete Communities, organized around Centers that are compact and connected by multiple, viable mobility options. What citizens have expressed they want is a complete community where they can meet all their daily needs with a short walk, bike ride, or drive from their homes. The development regulations by which we have made decisions in the past clearly have not produced that outcome.

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- Define compact. What does this mean, in various parts of Austin, and specifically in the Centers? We notice the word “density” is never used in the plan, but without defining “compact” with some type of density metric, we fear the plan simply leaves Austin continually debating what it means and the Plan’s real intent. How does “compact” relate to what we are seeing on the maps?
- In the Core Principles and the headlines for Priority Actions, find and change all references to “affordable housing” to use a broader term: We suggest either “household affordability” or “affordable living.” It is widely understood that the cost of living in Austin is best reflected by a formula that includes: Housing + transportation + utilities. Consistently using this language throughout the comprehensive plan document, particularly in Chapter 5 and the details of the priority action items, is critical for supporting the plan’s “compact and connected” principle and the overall Vision and realization of Central Texas sustainability. The plan should state clearly that a “compact and connected” living environment reduces all three major elements of household affordability.
- State in the plan’s language: The construction of more housing units in a more compact area reduces the land cost per unit; increases the tax base within City limits, when compared to sprawl type development; reduces the infrastructure and taxpayer dollars necessary to service those units, such as roadways, water and wastewater lines, and gas and electrical service; and is far more sustainable, thus further reducing long-term household costs. Furthermore, state that: Compact and connected development, which is critical to make the use and expansion of public transit more viable, can significantly reduce household transportation costs, to help middle-class and lower-income citizens, who often spend more of their take-home pay on transportation than on housing, particularly when transit is not a viable option. In addition, residents of more compact types of housing typically pay less for utilities than residents of typical suburban single-family homes.
- Explain how the Core Principle “Grow as a compact, connected city” directly contributes to achieving the remaining four Core Principles:
  - Sustainably manage water and other environmental resources;
  - Develop as an affordable and healthy community;
  - Integrate nature into the city;
  - Provide paths to prosperity for all.

Thank you for your dedication, consideration and time in helping Austinites achieve a more sustainable, compact and connected future. In consideration of the many thousands of citizen hours devoted to formulating this visionary comprehensive plan, we urge all involved to ensure that this plan is adopted and that the Vision comes to fruition with a robust implementation program.

Sincerely,



Sean Compton, LEED AP  
President  
Congress for the New Urbanism - Central Texas Chapter

CC: Mayor Lee Leffingwell, Mayor Pro-tem Sheryl Cole, Council Member Mike Martinez, Council Member Laura Morrison, Council Member Chris Riley, Council Member Bill Spelman, Council Member Kathy Tovo