

Volume 34, Number 14

June 29, 2012

Dear Client:

A comprehensive plan for the City of Austin's future is now in place, officially adopted by the Austin City Council. It looks from "now" to 30 years down the road. What will it do?

A lot of well-meaning, hard-working people spent more than two years defining where the city is today and where they feel the community wants it to go. They called the process "*Imagine Austin*." It is designed to **"guide the values and decision-making for investments in the City and provide a context for the next 30 years,"** according to City Manager Marc Ott.

Thirty years is a long time. In fact, the CEO charged with executing San Antonio's SA2020 master plan, **Darryl Byrd**, chided the Austin effort as being too long-range, saying *Imagine Austin's duration should be shorter – like the Alamo City's five-year timeframe – to keep the energy and engagement high*. Go to the "Archives" button at the top of the page to check our report on San Antonio's effort in the June 15th issue.

Well, the San Antonio criticism is a bit off-base. *Imagine Austin* has a built-in process so it can be updated on a regular basis. In fact, it proposes an **annual review of progress and a more thorough review every five years to determine if major updates to the plan are needed**.

The bickering misses the main point. What Austin's future values and beliefs should be are now written down as a broad blueprint. The real question is whether the plan will gather dust on a bookshelf or be **referenced on just about every issue that is brought up for a vote by the Austin City Council**. And this can be good or bad, depending upon your personal perspective.

This is not the first time Austin city and civic leaders have written a comprehensive master plan. There was one in place when City Manager Ott was hired in 2008. Frankly, it was not cited frequently (that old "gathering dust" cliché applied here). So Ott decided to put his mark on the city he was hired to manage and began setting up the process that resulted in *Imagine Austin*.

So what are the **main areas covered in the *Imagine Austin* plan for Austin's future?** Take a look at the next item.

Grand words were tossed around as the 30-year *Imagine Austin* comprehensive master plan was adopted. Lofty goals were articulated and many topics considered. But, as with all Grand Plan documents, the devil could be in the details.

Everyone, especially the City of Austin through its leadership, said all the right things as the *Imagine Austin* plan officially, by unanimous Council vote, became the **document to guide future city decisions**. They were in general, not specific, terms. Consider these quotes:

“Imagine Austin contains a wealth of community-defined priorities for **sustainability, livability, mobility, equity and prosperity**. The plan envisions a city of ‘complete communities’ where residents can easily meet everyday needs close to their homes, jobs, schools and more.”

Also: “In addition, *Imagine Austin* calls for household affordability and healthy foods across Austin; **good roads and ways to get around with or without a car**; excellent schools and paths to prosperity for all; more connected activity centers; and a creative, diverse community that values and respects each other.”

The plan includes implementation guidelines and the following **priority programs**:

1. A compact, connected Austin with **improved transportation options**.
2. Sustainably managed **water** resources.
3. Invest in Austin’s **workforce, education system and entrepreneurs**.
4. Protect **environmentally sensitive areas** and integrate nature into the City.
5. Invest in Austin’s **creative economy**.
6. Develop and maintain **household affordability** throughout Austin.
7. Create a “**Healthy Austin**” program.
8. Revise Austin’s **land development regulations and processes**.

What is meant by “the devil is in the details?” Well, let’s just pick out a few phases for illustration. Does “healthy Austin” mean **banning certain sweetened soft drinks** as New York City is proposing? Does “housing affordability *throughout Austin*” mean inexpensive housing in high-dollar neighborhoods, to the extent that the **value of existing homes may be affected**? Does a reference to “improved transportation options” mean “**no matter the cost?**” Interestingly, **there was no mention of tax burdens on homes and businesses in the 8-point priority list**. You can probably add to this list of questions.

Answers to these and many other questions will emerge as the Austin City Council considers a wide range of issues in near-term and long-term commitments. And, since this is Austin, there will be a lot of citizen input on decisions deemed controversial. Calling the plan a “collective vision for Austin’s future,” **Mayor Lee Leffingwell said “we are committed to doing our part as a City to begin implementing this plan**. We look forward to working with our partners and the public to make it happen.”

Look around. Where can you find housing – on average – that is newer than most of the nation? You guessed it. Austin, Texas, USA.

This is not a statistic you see reported on a regular basis. But a recent analysis of USCensus Bureau data, indicates **that nearly 14.97% of the living units in the Austin area have been built since 2005.** (For this purpose, the Business Journals' *On Numbers* defines homes as all dwellings, including houses, condominiums and apartments.)

This placed Austin as number one for having the **newest housing stock in the nation**, by the narrowest of margins. Another fast-growing Texas city, the Lower Rio Grande Valley's McAllen, was #2 at 14.96%. When you think about it, this shouldn't be too surprising. **The Austin area's population has been growing at one of the fastest paces in the nation.**

As a result, **apartment buildings** are almost full and developers are moving quickly to create more apartment units. **Homes** have sold at such a fast pace it is now a seller's market, with buyers moving quickly if they want to lock down a home purchase. New home builders are erecting new homes to meet the demand. **Downtown condos** are selling at a decent clip and more **apartment buildings** are planned for downtown.

The pressure for a dwellings is strong in the Austin area and it appears the pressure will continue for the near term. **No wonder the Austin area has scored at the top of the list** as the metro that has the newest housing stock in the nation.

The Texas roadways may have a little more traffic than normal this summer. At least a survey by AAA Texas indicates this may be the case.

Each year, AAA takes a poll in Texas to determine how many Texans plan a non-business road trip. This year, **three-fourths of those polled said they will probably take at least one summer getaway.** This compares to 72% a year ago.

Guess which destination in Texas is the most popular for Texans. San Antonio. No surprise, it's been that way for years. The Alamo City has always been a tourist hot spot. What is the #2 Texas destination for other Texans? Galveston. **Austin is #3** and the Dallas-Fort Worth area is #4.

For purposes of this survey, AAA defined vacation travel as a non-business trip in June, July or August. **It must cover more than 50 miles each way and requires an overnight stay** to be counted in this calculation. By the way, the summer traveler will have a little help from the Texas Department of Transportation. Check out the next item to find out what's new.

Now that summer officially arrived this week, are you thinking about a Texas road trip? If you are, even if it's just a weekender, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has come up with a nifty travel aid for you.

It also can be a handy tool for road warriors, such as sales people who spend most of each day in a car making sales calls. **It's a travel condition website. TxDOT calls it "Drive Texas" and you can access it at www.DriveTexas.org.** It's meant to provide drivers with real-time traffic conditions all across the Lone Star State. TxDOT has also produced a mobile version.

For families who hear the age-old "are we there yet?" from the back seat, a map showing the **state-maintained rest stops and travel information centers** could be a useful tool (especially for family members with small bladders!).

There are other features of a more serious nature that can save time and frustration. For instance, the map shows where **roadways are under construction, where accidents have just occurred** – even damaged roads.

You can click on "Drive Texas" to get a look at **live weather radar that is in motion**. You can track where weather may be changing – or the distance you could be driving in wet conditions. Flooding conditions are also featured.

Icing and snow conditions will be highlighted during the winter. Summer, as every Texan knows, is hurricane season. The **EvacuLanes and ContraFlow lanes** that go into effect to aid evacuations will be on the TxDOT site.

The verdict is still out on how well the website will work. TxDOT has thought of that, and put this CYA admonition on the site: "**Road conditions can change quickly; we offer NO warranty that this report is accurate or complete.**" You are now advised.

Dr. Louis Overholster says Congress is where a person gets up to speak, has nothing to say, nobody listens ... then everyone disagrees!

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher