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Dear Client:

If you ever had any doubt the City of Austin is doing all it can to restrict cars in downtown Austin, just pick up the Street Design Guide released this week by the city's Transportation Department. There it is in black-and-white. It reads: "the modal hierarchy is pedestrian first, then bicycle and transit, then vehicles." But there were even more examples this week.

Civic activist and former publisher/founder of *Texas Monthly* **Mike Levy** (we used to call him a gadfly) criticized details of the Guide. He also e-mailed "they have told folks along Sixth (street) that they are already committed to **taking away lanes on each side for two-way bike lanes on each side of the street**, and making Sixth two-way, and removing even more parking spots from the downtown area."

Levy added: "Two big retailers have recently left downtown: **Brooks Brothers** on the southwest corner of 6th and Congress; and **Keepers** on the southeast corner of 6th and Congress. **The reason they have given: No parking for customers.**"

"Step on a bus in afternoon rush hour that's stopped in a dedicated bus lane on Guadalupe or Lavaca, take a quick look, and get off. Most only have a few passengers, at best," he continued. "**But the gridlock on these two streets is unnecessarily compounded by the usage of a vehicular lane for empty buses.** Gridlock in the downtown area is also compounded by Brazos and soon Colorado streets converted to two-way from one-way and a loss of a lane on each street."

Attorney **Brian Greig**, who offices downtown, emailed his concern about the Guide that gives **private vehicles the lowest priority**: "Until there is a viable transit system **this will keep many from downtown, especially older and disabled folks, and anyone not wanting to walk or peddle to town when it's 90 degrees.**"

Oh yeah, Mayor Pro Tem **Kathie Tovo is floating an idea to ban all cars from Congress Avenue a distance of about two miles for one day**, from the State Capitol south, across Lady Bird Lake, all the way to West Mary Street. **She wants to do this to spread the word about bicycle transportation, calling it "Ciclovia."** She may not pull this off until sometime next year. In the meantime, she is getting city staff to explore the possibility, including what costs would be associated. Question: Is this just one more thing -- or part of a trend?

As of today, the remaining downtown on-street parking is expected to get a little more expensive. The Austin City Council has voted to extend on-street, metered parking hours by one extra day to match those already in effect Thursdays through Saturdays. Here's what this action means:

The downtown area covered by these regs includes those streets that fall between IH-35, Lamar Boulevard, Lady Bird Lake and Tenth Street. Parking hours for Thursdays through Saturdays are from 8 a.m. to midnight. **Now, Wednesday hours have been extended (currently 8 am to 6 pm) to align with the Thursday-Saturday hours.**

The city reasoning: **it wants to create turnover based on the increased demand on Wednesday nights.** The city said it has found Wednesday metered parking to be occupied above 85% "in many areas," which it said exceeds "parking management best practices." The roll-out of this change will occur incrementally over the course of the summer.

While still on the subject of downtown, Mike Levy for decades has been a loud voice on behalf of public safety in Austin -- from EMS to fire to police. Well, the horrible high-rise fire last week in the Kensington section of London that killed upwards of 80 people (with the death toll still rising) tripped his Austin public safety button this week.

You've been aware of the massive high-rise construction in downtown Austin in recent decades. In fact, several still under construction claim they will be among the tallest when completed. **No end seems to be in sight. Hotels, condos and apartment buildings dominate the changing downtown skyline.** With this in mind, Levy has a startling, sobering statistic:

"Austin has the same number of stations, fire personnel and apparatus in the immediate downtown area that it had in 1970," claims Levy. Think about this. The same number of firefighters. And now instead of firefighters battling high-rise blazes, racing up the stairs in 8-10 story buildings (which were the tallest in 1970) the challenge is at least tripled. Here's how Levy phrases the difficulties:

"Say you are wearing full bunker gear, a Scott airpack on your back, and have to carry a 90 lb. bundle of hose up 30 stories ..." Get the picture? Of course, you say these buildings are built to modern, fire-safety standards. True. And that's important. But there are other factors.

"For residential high rises, once the fire marshal tags a building with a certificate of occupancy, they are forbidden to enter a unit without a warrant. So, a meth lab may be in the next unit and a next door neighbor expresses concern ... You can be in 100% compliance with current fire code, **high rises still catch on fire with loss of civilian and firefighter lives.**" Levy concludes. Conditions in 2017 are obviously vastly different from those in 1970.

Austin-area population growth is an undeniable fact. But the terms used to describe aspects of growth need to be re-considered. For the longest time, “density” has been thought to be good and “sprawl” to be bad. However in this highly mobile society, people are making personal decisions that show them to be highly adaptable. And, frankly, local leaders would be wise to accept and adapt to the natural evolution of population growth.

Consider what is happening in the Austin metro. Then realize we are not alone. The Austin area is a great example of what is occurring all across the US. *The New York Times*, using USCensus data and USPostal Service counts, found cities are not becoming as dense as previously thought. **Of the 51 metro areas with more than 1 million people, average neighborhood density rose in only 10 and fell in 41.**

This was especially pronounced in **Austin and neighboring San Antonio where average neighborhood density fell by 5% between 2010 and 2016 – among the tops in the nation. Put it another way, Austin and San Antonio led the nation in sprawl.** Houston and Oklahoma City were up there as well. Is this good or bad? Or neither? Look at the implications of this evolution of population growth.

Take one of our five metro counties – Williamson. It increased population by 25% during this period. Hays County also grew, as did Bastrop and Caldwell counties. As we said, Travis County fell by 5%. Is this “sprawl” bad? Not at all. **It reflects personal decisions made in the best interests of the residents. Some complain that “affordability” forced some of these decisions.**

Maybe, but so what? Sure you may want to buy a Maserati, but if you can only afford a Kia. You buy a Kia. You may prefer small-town life for your family, not the hustle-bustle of the big city. You think a million-dollar mansion in West Lake Hills would be a dream home, but **you can’t afford it, so you buy what is best for your circumstances.** Everyone makes these personal decisions.

If this is the case, **why force costly governmental density changes to alter natural evolution?** If a young professional makes the big bucks to live in a downtown high rise and enjoy the night life, so be it. But why force “unnatural” affordability adaptations to accommodate a few? **Affordable choices are made throughout an individual’s lifetime.** Not simply, can a struggling musical artist live near the downtown club of their choice right now?

Sure it may change cultural patterns, especially for struggling musicians. But, as an example, those who thrive on the culture of Paris, do not necessarily live near the Louvre. The reality is the residential world is made up of enclaves. So why not recognize what is happening? And instead, **shouldn’t local leaders concentrate on delivering services such as fire and police protection, solutions for mobility, etc., instead of “shoe-horning” affordable residences downtown that run counter to the natural evolution of population growth?**

One of the most polarizing figures in Washington (and there are a bunch of them) is amazing colleagues by his changing tactics. Texas junior USSenator Ted Cruz has managed to be called some of the more vile names imaginable by members of both parties. But now, he is trying a radically new role: dealmaker.

According to *Bloomberg News*, Cruz is “seeking to **unite warring wings of the Republican Party** around an effort to kill Obamacare and is showing a **new willingness to compromise** with colleagues.” This is the same Ted Cruz whose abrasiveness led to these comments:

Former GOP House Speaker **John Boehner** once called Cruz “Lucifer in the flesh” and the most “miserable son of a bitch” he had ever worked with. Cruz also was not one to mince words, calling Senate GOP Majority Leader **Mitch McConnell** a liar on the Senate floor.

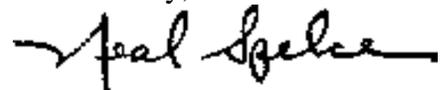
Another member of his own party, Senator **Lindsey Graham**, joked to reporters that senators would not convict Cruz’s murderer. Oh, that’s not all. Graham also said a choice between **Donald Trump** and Cruz for their party’s nomination was like choosing to get shot or getting poisoned.

So, what happened? “**The entire world changed on election day**,” said Cruz who is now negotiating regularly with McConnell and other senators. “**My focus today is on delivering results and not wasting this historic opportunity.**”

“For several months now, I have been spending day and night, **meeting with House members, meeting with Senators, meeting with the administration to bring people together** to actually deliver on our promise to repeal Obamacare and critically to lower premiums to make health care more affordable,” Cruz told *Bloomberg*. Oh, yeah. Cruz is up for re-election next year and is campaigning vigorously all across Texas.

Speaking of nasty references, **Dr. Louis Overholster**’s favorite political insult was uttered by Winston Churchill who said: “He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire!”

Sincerely,



Editor/Publisher