



AIA Austin

April 23, 2019

The Honorable Steve Adler, Mayor
Honorable City Council Members
City Manager Spencer Cronk

RE: Land Development Code Transition Zones

Dear Mayor, City Council Members, and City Manager,

AIA Austin has been following the discussion related to the LDC rewrite on the Council Message Boards since late-March with great interest. We understand that the detailed answers and additional policy direction given to City Manager Cronk in response to his 3/15 memo will create a framework that guides the Land Development Code (LDC) rewrite, and therefore shape the future of Austin for generations to come. The discussion on this topic through the message boards, City Council's work sessions, and meetings is an incredibly important policy debate, and we applaud the council members who have proposed the bold reforms that are needed. Unprecedented reform must occur to solve our community's affordability crisis, mobility challenges, and to fight global climate change.

Unsurprisingly, of the proposals put forth to date, the goals and scope of the mapping appears to have the least consensus among council members. Although this does not need to be a political process, we find ourselves in one anyway, due to a lack of district-level planning that should have occurred after the passage of Imagine Austin in 2012. As a follow-up to AIA Austin's 3/29 letter to the City Manager, Mayor, and City Council, we respectfully offer the following points on the issues of planning, transition zones, and compatibility for your consideration.

Transition zone criteria is no substitute for planning. Even the most robust matrix of data points and criteria for mapping transition zones is, at best, a tool to locate new housing supply in an equitable way. While these transition zones will help achieve our city's housing and transit goals, it falls short of the context-sensitive, district-level planning that is needed. Planning, at this scale, can celebrate local cultural amenities, identify historic resources, help preserve the identity of a place, and establish district-level goals for parks, connectivity, stormwater management, parking, and housing types in ways that a criteria matrix cannot.

Recommendations:

1. *Map interim transition zones that may get "smoothed out" in a future district-level planning process.*

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2. *As part of the formal adoption of a new LDC, include a companion resolution that establishes a process, timeline, and set of goals for the new planning effort.*
3. *Complete all district-level planning within five years of adoption of a new LDC.*

Compatibility through interim transition zones. Question #4 in the City Manager's memo requests policy guidance on the issue of compatibility, but the three standard responses he offers at least presuppose some level of compatibility will be needed. While there are suggestions on the table that would eliminate compatibility on corridor-fronting lots (by mapping non-triggering zones behind them), there may be a real opportunity to render it obsolete if the transition zones are mapped appropriately.

Recommendations:

1. *Map all Centers and Corridors with transition zones that create harmonious transitions between lower density neighborhoods and high-intensity areas.*
2. *Allow aggregation of corridor-fronting lots with the lot directly behind it.*
3. *Review the necessity for compatibility after transition zones are fully mapped.*

A sensible approach to transition zones. We appreciate the thoughtfulness in CM Casar and Garza's "Transition Zone Mapping Criteria" matrix (posted 4/18) that illustrates scenarios for different contexts and combinations of criteria and feel this is a solid document to start from. We offer the following additions and modifications:

Recommendations:

1. *Use actual on-the-ground walksheds when mapping 1/4 and 1/2 mile from corridors. Walksheds should account for lack of designated safe-crossings and poor connectivity.*
2. *Add mixed-use zones in the first block of "high tier" transition zones to allow opportunities for small commercial uses where appropriate.*
3. *Map "Lot 2" in Tier 2 and Tier 3 transition zones with an equivalent to MF4 or MF5 when adjacent to shallow corridor lots to allow it to be easily aggregated with the corridor lot.*
4. *Extend the scope of all transition zones to 1/4 mile to align with the ASMP's call for transit-supportive density. Extend up to a 1/2 mile around frequent transit stops.*
5. *Replace R2 zoning within the 1/4 and 1/2 mile walksheds with a house-scale zone that allows more transit-supportive density.*

AIA Austin is encouraged by the direction of the LDC rewrite process, but we hope Council will consider the above recommendations when deliberating mapping, compatibility, and transition zones. These factors will have great influence in achieving the desired density at Austin's Centers and Corridors. AIA Austin looks forward to continuing to help align our LDC with the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan and we appreciate the opportunity to provide input to that end.

Sincerely,



Michael Hsu, AIA, IIDA
President, AIA Austin