



Meeting Notes

March 8, 2021

Call to Order

Recording started by Tamara Fou.

Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 3:01 p.m.

Welcome by Co-Chairs

Mr. Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, took the roll and presented the speaker rules. 16 committee members were present during roll call. There were 86 participants.

Director's Report: Margaret Wallace Brown, Director, Planning & Development Department welcomed everyone to the meeting and mentioned the following via a PowerPoint presentation. **Graphics highlighting current vs. future detention requirements.** See recording.

- The Planning & Development Department, Public Works Department, and the Mayor's Offices for Resilience and Recovery are revising Chapter 9 of the Houston Design Manual (IDM) to allow a 65% stormwater detention exemption for shared driveway single family residential developments on less than 15,000sf properties to be consistent with the detention exemption for front loading single family residential developments.
- The new change should remove the current disincentive for developing shared driveway projects and even the playing field for these two types of single-family residential developments.

Director's Report Questions? Comments?

Peter Freedman: Thanks to you and your team for doing this. This has been an issue on the affordable housing side. I think this is a great resolution. We just received a checklist of new development requirements that seems like they'll be requiring detention for all lots regardless of impervious cover and size. Is that correct?

Margaret Wallace Brown: Peter, I am unaware of that. We'll be happy to check into it and we'll get you an answer. During this IDM review process, it became clear that the front loaders result in more impervious surface within the right of way (ROW). With front loaders, there's also less access for on-street parking and more interruptions of the pedestrian realm as opposed to shared driveway configurations. Sidewalks and the open-ditch stormwater system are interrupted with every front loader driveway. Shared driveway projects minimize these interruptions. These factors influenced our decisions for revising the stormwater detention requirements.

Sonny Garza: Thank you, Margaret, and your team, for presenting something that seems so obvious and genius. The solution makes perfect sense. We've leveled the playing field and developers now have more than a single affordable option available to them.

Meeting Agenda: Suvidha Bandi introduced the agenda items for the rest of the meeting.

- Preliminary ideas for front loading lots
- Preliminary ideas for small lot developments
- Homework activity and next meeting
- Public comments

Preliminary Ideas for Front Loading Lots:

Single Family Residential Definition:

- One building containing not more than two separate units (duplex)
- One dwelling unit and a detached secondary unit of not more than 900 SF
- A building containing one dwelling unit on one lot that is connected by a party wall to another dwelling unit on an adjacent lot

Intent of the Current Ordinance. **Graphics Highlighting Current Ordinance Standards.** See Recording:

- To allow more density in the urban core
- pedestrian use of sidewalks is not impeded by vehicles blocking the sidewalks

Challenges with the Current Ordinance. **Graphics Highlighting Current Ordinance Challenges.** See Recording:

- Street frontage with no porches, lawns, or visible entry doors
- Long stretches of subdivided lots (driveways) along the block
- Too much concrete areas
- Pedestrian connections to sidewalks not provided
- Parked vehicles in driveways often block the sidewalk
- On-street parking is eliminated
- Difficulty meeting landscape requirements (street trees)
- Problems in providing standard and regulated services
- Streetscape looks more like an alley than street ROW
- Character of the street/neighborhood changes

Elements of Good design: More Walkable, Pedestrian-Friendly Developments and Streetscapes. **Graphics Highlighting Walkability Elements.** See Recording:

- Front door: orients the house to the street
- Ground story windows: eyes on the street from ground story rooms
- Front porch: outdoor space to socialize and watch the world go by
- Walkway: direct pedestrian route to the public sidewalk
- Front yard: outdoor open area for gardening/landscaping/infiltration
- Sidewalk: safe, clear and unobstructed pedestrian route
- Tree lawn: space for trees, buffer from street for pedestrians
- Street trees: shade and comfort for pedestrians
- On-street parking: additional parking, slows traffic down

Alternative Development Ideas. **Graphics Highlighting Example Developments.** See Recording:

- Flag lots: minor tweaks to share access staff, suggest flag lots for mid-block subdivision of lots
- Shared driveway: adjust detention rules, address inconsistencies between Chapter 42 and the IDM, require shared driveway in some instances

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- Alley access: require alley access for properties along alley, work with Public Works for a simpler process for alley access projects
 - Other ideas: one car garage, tandem garage, common driveway curb cut, homes front on the street, minimum width for front loading lots, reduce parking for small units, narrow driveways, minimum distance between driveways, no parking minimum near transit, increase garage building line

Preliminary Ideas for Front Loading Lots Questions? Comments?

Mike Dishberger: There's a lot of information here. I'm not sure that all the things you listed under ordinance intent are correct. I was part of those meetings—we were trying to get more density. The flag lot idea is good. The detention update in the IDM is great too—thank you for doing that. Related to alleys—alleys can't be built in Houston because Public Works makes it so difficult. You basically must rebuild alleys between your project and the corner, including stormwater detention, to be able to use them. There are only 3 blocks in the Heights with City-maintained alleys—a neighborhood known for alleys. If the City improved and maintained the alleys, we'd build alley accessed developments all day long. People love them.

Margaret Wallace Brown: I agree with you, Mike. We're working with Public Works on the alley problem. It's on my list of things to fix.

Curtis Davis: That was helpful, Mike. I have a recommendation for staff to consider. Would it be possible for the Planning & Development, Public Works, and Building Departments to have a special review process designed for these types of developments, given of the complexity on issues like alleys and parking? It seems like the current permitting structure doesn't accommodate this level of design review complexity in a timely manner. This would give builders more certainty with project cost projections, etc. I've been in other jurisdictions where this happens. Maybe this can happen by contracting out plan review services?

Margaret Wallace Brown: Is this related to hiring consultants to determine what design rules might be? That's what we're doing here with this Committee. Or do you mean bring on consultants at the permitting stage based on rules recommended as part of this Committee?

Curtis Davis: More of the latter. Based on rules decided here, developers could opt into an expedited review process administered by a third-party review who's well versed in these issues.

Margaret Wallace Brown: Our teams have various expertise among them and get assigned certain types of reviews accordingly. Can this review process be better? Absolutely. Do we need to hire a consultant to do it? I don't know. We'll look into it. Thanks for the suggestion.

Sonny Garza: Mr. Davis, are you saying a group that would look at these things outside of Chapter 42 and make a decision? In addition to or outside the ordinance?

Curtis Davis: Not so much outside the ordinance, but more related to exceptions that may be granted for certain purposes. That review might facilitate the approval of that exception being granted. I did work in DC several years ago that had complex fire reviews. There was a big review backlog so a third-party reviewer was retained

for those projects with specific expertise in these issues and where the subtleties of where exceptions could be granted. Final approval was still up to City staff, but it expedited the process. This could be a good option for these smaller projects in Houston. I know that staff is stretched thin—this could help free up staff to think more strategically.

Neal Dikeman: I'd like to echo and expand on the comments related to alleys and expedited permitting processes. This is a good idea that staff is working on, but it'll take some iterations to get a proposal that makes sense. The ability to use alleys would be a huge win but it won't happen until the City gets the alley issues under control—i.e. ownership, permitting, not treating them like streets, etc. The opportunity is to have alleys function as a middle option between streets and private drives. The idea of a shortened process for projects that don't have driveways on the street would be an incentive and maybe could help streamline things. If you create an easy button that allows applicants to build alley loaded projects faster than front loaded projects, I think we'd see a lot of positive impacts quickly. It should not take us 6-12 months to build a house in Houston. Also, if we can get more traffic off streets and into alleys, that would be a big win for residents, developers, and City infrastructure.

Tyron McDaniel: I echo many sentiments that have already been said. We have a property in Fifth Ward that has an alley and we're apprehensive about how to move forward because of the alley access issues. None of our projects tend to have front driveways. I'm all for options that allow us to make using alleys easier to approve and to provide different housing solutions from an alley access perspective.

Peter Freedman: Thank you again for the work on the common driveways—I'm happy with that. The only option I'm not seeing here is the idea of not requiring on-lot parking. This would impact street parking, but maybe you could count street parking towards that requirement. It should at least be looked at.

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, that's an idea that we're looking at. We're thinking about reducing parking requirements for units that are smaller or for properties near transit.

Zion Escobar: I'm excited to see movement on the alley options because that would help with us in Freedmen's Town with our narrow streets and additional curb make on-street parking problems worse. In California, I've seen oversized alleyways get used for overflow parking. I was wondering how that would fit into any future regulations.

Jeffrey Kaplan: I hope in the future that we can move away from townhouse densities to more of a stacked flat model as land prices increase. One solution for existing frontloaded townhomes is to create incentives for micro retail or small office spaces to turn garages into storefronts and eliminate head in parking. This would turn townhomes into small mixed-use projects.

Mike Dishberger: I don't want the new rules to ban front loaders directly or indirectly through overly onerous regulations. There's a reason why we build more front loaders than shared driveway projects aside from the current drainage requirements. Buyers want the front loaders because they get 4 parking places. If parking is problem on the sidewalks, have police enforce it—the issue will go away. People that do have on-street parking

in front of their yards put rocks in the ROW or ask the City to add “no parking” signs. The homes we build allow people to not have to park on the street.

Scott Cubbler: Suvidha, I’m hearing that we’re looking at on-street parking as a positive?

Suvidha Bandi: On-street parking is an opportunity for people to park if needed but it’s not an alternative to parking within the property.

Scott Cubbler: I attend this meeting as a representative of the Super Neighborhood Alliance. The Alliance tends to think that on-street parking is a terrible idea for our community. It prevents the movement of traffic around our neighborhoods and creates havoc for solid waste pick up. We’re already in a situation where our solid waste doesn’t get picked up at a regular time. The tandem parking concepts that you’re proposing would just shift all the cars into the street. The idea of eliminating parking all together near a mass transit hub creates the environment for more street parking. We’re not in favor of it—it will create problems and developers will save money by not allowing for it.

Suvidha Bandi: I’d like to answer your question about shared driveways. In the example I showed, each has 2 car garages already. So, on-street parking is mainly for visitors. I hear your concerns about on-street parking on narrow streets. Related to solid waste, we discussed the idea of establishing “no parking” signs for trash days to address those concerns.

Scott Cubbler: I like the idea, but I lived in New York City, which has opposite street parking twice a week for trash pick up... I have 4 kids—the idea that on-street parking will only be for visitors is absolutely not valid. It’s a situation where someone with experience is at the mercy of someone with a theory. I had 6 cars in my driveway at one point. Every morning would be a shuffle to get cars moved. I didn’t park on the street, but that doesn’t mean others aren’t going to. We have a hard enough time getting law enforcement to reinforce the noise ordinances that we already have. To think that we’re going to put street parking signs up and have law enforcement to enforce it—I’m not seeing it. Law enforcement is already stretched. I think the idea of pushing more cars into on-street parking is a bad idea for us.

Suvidha Bandi: I think there are different needs for the population. It’s not a certain need that we’re catering to. There’s a different spectrum of needs. We have to think about all the different populations and think more about future demographic changes.

Scott Cubbler: This is why we call them single “family” residences, not “single” residences.

Tyron McDaniel: Reducing parking for smaller units is of interest to me, especially as an affordable housing developer. Like Suvidha said, when you’re planning for or building in a city, there are a multiplicity of needs for different people. My business is built around supplying for needs that are unconventionally met. I have a family member who moved here from Chicago without a vehicle. There are people who move to our city from other areas that feel that they don’t need a vehicle if they’re living in a major city with access to transit. We see a lot of our clients using public transit. I want to speak for those who may not be on the Committee or are not privy

to these meetings. Not everyone has 2-5 vehicles. There are many families in Houston who use public transportation.

Mike Dishberger: The reason why we don't do all these shared driveways is because people want front parking and a backyard. Suvidha, the examples that you're showing don't have backyards. People aren't going to barbeque in their front yards. These examples also end up forcing 3 stories. People don't want 3 stories. Most of these ideas just ban front loaders and 2 story homes. Instead, you're forcing crowded 3 story homes with inadequate parking and HOAs. We've talked about 1-car or tandem garages and the homes are just too expensive. It takes 2 people to buy a house today. In Houston, those people have 2 cars. We're not a city with mass transit like Chicago, so you need 2 cars. Cutting the width of driveways and garages down will just make access harder and Public Works won't allow it. Also, Public Works can change the IDM whenever they want without needing to take it to City Council for a vote. If Public Works wanted to change the rules, they could do it tomorrow if they wanted to. I'm all for making it easier to do shared driveways and alley loaded developments, but most of these ideas deal with getting rid of front-loaded driveways. I'm here to make sure that we don't ban them or make it impossible to live in those homes.

Jeffrey Kaplan: I work on walkable urban development along transit corridors, and I can't tell you how many people and loved ones I've lost to other cities who would have stayed here if we had a couple of authentic walkable neighborhoods. Front-loading townhouses absolutely kill the ability to have connected urbanism for many reasons. Besides being all about the car, it makes the condition feel like you're not in a safe, walkable neighborhood. Some neighborhoods are what they are, but in neighborhoods where we've invested millions of dollars into transit and policies that encourage transit-oriented development, we have an opportunity to get innovative for townhome products going into those communities specifically. The trend is that a small home is compromised today in a burgeoning neighborhood. We're also working on Houston's and Texas's first co-housing community, which is another situation where the parking is isolated from each unit. But this requires excepting another solution and moving a little further to get to your car. I'm sure there's a market and a supply and demand misalignment for products that cater to people who want authentic, walkable urbanism—and it needs to be in these transit corridors. My ask is that we look at transit-oriented development specific code first to solve the townhouse issue because I think we can figure out innovative solutions there first. We need to provide alternatives to people who don't want a driveway in front of their townhome.

Curtis Davis: Thanks, Suvidha, for pulling together these alternatives. While I generally agree with Scott and Mike on some of these challenges, the City is under pressure to make changes and I think there's a balance that needs to struck. I think more of us are becoming transit dependent. The transit conditions are improving. The market for that is changing as people come in. I can't argue with Mike about the issues that he's facing, but Mike's market is not the whole market. We're seeing a lot of changes in the city for those of us who have lived here for a long time. So, I think we need to look forward beyond our immediate experiences. Nobody could figure out how to use an iPad until they made it and people started buying them. I think we need to think about housing solutions similarly. I've developed co-housing projects in other cities and I think we'll see more of them here with time. We need policies for greater density, fewer cars in the street, and less parking overall.

Megan Sigler: I hear Mike loud and clear. It's about offering alternatives and seeing what the market will bear.

Sandy Stevens: I just want to second what Megan said. I think it's a complex issue. I live on a street where I can look down the street and see front loader after front loader. They are popular but I think it's time to look at alternatives because in those blocks, there is no street parking. It's about what the market will bear, and the developers know that better than I do.

Peter Freedman: Related to the market, you must build to what the market wants. But right now, we're experiencing such a cost inflation on home prices that we're going to need alternatives to less expensive homes. Anytime I see the word, "require", it just means more hassle to get things through the process. Instead of requiring a common driveway cut, why not "allow" a common driveway cut instead? I don't like increasing the garage building line because that means more impervious cover. I think that no parking minimums is good, especially for smaller homes. I worry about the minimum distance between driveways requirement—it makes things difficult for 20' wide lots with no other parking access alternatives.

Neal Dikeman: The committee is talking about parking issues again. You've got to get the space from somewhere if we're going denser. It's either no car or you must cheat some space somewhere. I agree about looking to alleys for extra parking capacity. Maybe we only need sidewalks on only one side of the street to allow for more parking on narrower, lower traffic streets? Why can't we cover up culverts with parking spaces? A lot of these issues are that these are managed by separate departments, and the silos create problems. Unit costs go up with the more minimum requirements added, regardless of type. It's a combination of those that leads to many of the challenges. We need to relax some if not all to some degree to pick up that space. You can build a house of this type in 2 months—it doesn't need to be 6-12 months, which increases costs. The combination of uncertainty, time, and limitations is what causes the issues. If I could get any of those variables back, I'd want flexibility on the lot then speed of permitting in that order—everything else can take care of itself.

Peter Freedman: Related to common driveways, I think there's a restriction about not being able to have a common driveway beyond a certain length from a street. That might be another issue when you're looking into other designs.

Sonny Garza: We're looking to create a more level playing field here. Our thought was that if your property allows you to build front loaders, then you simply do. We don't want you to build front loaders because you can't build a common driveway, alley, or flag lot. We're going to be living on a smaller scale over the next 20-40 years and possibly using less cars. Right now, we know that Houston has been built for people in cars. As Suvidha mentioned, we're seeing the unintended consequences of building places for cars. I think we've had a great discussion and I want to be clear that we're not making any decisions today. With that, I'll close this part of the conversation.

Suvidha Bandi: Thank you for all the comments that we received. We'll take all this input into consideration and develop proposals in collaboration with Public Works.

Preliminary Ideas for Small Lot Developments:

Suvidha Bandi: We don't have time for small lot developments today, but generally this means allowing more density by allowing homes on smaller lots that could face turn inwards onto courtyards.

Homework:

Lynn Henson: Visit Let's letstalkhouston.org/livable-places to:

- Site visit and survey: Please visit a short list of blocks that we will send to you and walk or bike along the street. By walking or biking, you'll be able to examine and experience the different types of development firsthand, including many of the benefits and challenges that we've talked about today. The blocks included will match the examples presented today. There will also be a survey where you can provide your feedback on the project website. Staff will provide an update at a future meeting to share survey feedback.

Kathy Payton: When would you like this homework activity to be done by?

Suvidha Bandi: Before the next meeting. So, you'll have 3 weeks to visit.

Curtis Davis: Will today's presentation be available on the website? Also, related to your questions to us about regulatory suggestions within future presentations, I would suggest that you frame them in this way: "Thou shalt"; "thou may"; or "thou may with permissions". That would make things a little clearer.

Next Meeting: April 5th

Public Comment:

George Frey: To start, the detention exemption content from the Director's Report was not on the public agenda. For that to be thrown out there is somewhat of a surprise. I would request that these changes be put onto a public agenda because there are a lot of stakeholders that it affects who would like to be more aware of it. It's very frustrating and disappointing to hear that the different silos within City Hall are not talking to each other—that Planning didn't know that Public Works had issued a new requirement that requires all lots to have detention requirements, etc. I also wonder why we should be removing this exemption to make it a level playing field. Why shouldn't we add the requirement universally across the board to preserve our city's drainage? I heard widespread applauding to remove a problem for some people on the call, not realizing that removing one person's problem creates serious problems elsewhere for other neighbors who are being flooded with rampant development with no regard. There's a focus on smaller developments here—I'd like to highlight the need to go after those larger developments too. There's all this talk about single family homes—but I'd like to see more coordination between different entities within the City to try to improve the overall networking of the City. There's a lot of talk about Houston not being a pedestrian-friendly city. I would like to get rid of my car. The only reason that I have a car is to drive to the supermarket and to fields for my children because I live in a food desert. There are major thoroughfares without any crosswalks for me to get across. Park sector 12 has not been following up with its 2015 master plan.

Eric Hymowitz: I've been building for over 20 years—mainly first floor living homes and 2-2.5 story homes. Between my company other builders on this call, we represent thousands of buyers of front loader homes. I can

tell you that young families and empty nesters don't want to go to a third floor for a master bedroom—they require these front loaders. Somebody mentioned yards—some of the pictures being shown look like somebody's version of utopia. I'll admit, they're beautiful pictures. But from a practical standpoint, families and little kids aren't playing in these little front yards. Many of the front loaders have nice backyards for young children. Also, out of the 80+ people on this call, I'm thinking that not many of us would be leaving our cars parked on the street overnight. Many of the cars parked on the street are not there for very long and are just guests of homeowners. I would want my guests to be parked up close to my home versus having them park on the street.

Ken Boyesen: I've also been a builder in Houston for about 21 years. We build front loaders and shared driveways. Someone mentioned the length of a shared driveway—200 feet is the longest it can be due to the turnaround required for fire truck. No matter how you slice it, you're going to have a net decrease of parking spaces. With front loaders, you have 2 in the garage, and 2 in the driveway. Even with guest parking spaces, you're not going to get that with the shared driveway model—so your streets are going to be lined with cars. Related to that homework assignment, imagine biking on these roads when both sides are lined with cars because there's no driveway to park in. To me, this makes it incredibly unfriendly to families. Removing front loaders is really going to change the whole look and feel of a neighborhood. Like Mr. Hymowitz was saying, instead of having a 10–15-foot yard, you're going to have a 5-foot yard—a tremendous quality of life difference. Also, the time and cost that it takes to engineer and permit shared driveways would probably add a couple of months and several thousands of dollars to the cost of a home.

Richard Mazzarino: I've been building inside the city for 15 years and 95% of my business is building front loaded homes on 25-foot-wide lots. I've built hundreds of them. I believe these changes will destroy my business and probably cost my 15 employees their jobs—not to mention a lot of tax revenue and fees to the City. I think a lot of us on this call will be forced to build 1 house per lot instead of 2 which will increase housing costs, or we'll have to move out into the County and start over. My company made the decision to go to the front loader low density model versus common driveways about a decade ago. Our customers don't want single car garages while having to leave their other car in the driveway. Has anyone on this call seen the police reports of cars getting broken into overnight that have been parked in a driveway? Nothing happens to these thieves either. People don't want tandem garages—they're being forced to ask their spouse to move their car so that they can go to work. We talked about alleys, which is great, but I'd also like to point out that our city alleys are a mess--half are built over by private residents. I've heard a lot of talk about common driveway projects like they're some magic bullet. Has anyone driven through these common driveway neighborhoods during non-work hours? The narrow streets are lined with cars to the point where they're creating traffic jams, safety issues, and other hazards. Common driveways also put a lot more strain on infrastructure than front loaders. Lastly, we talk about front doors facing the streets. While it sounds wonderful, a lot of our customers express concerns about having their front doors accessible from the street given the dramatic increase in violent crime in our city. People want their privacy and backyards.

Taylor Becker: I'm joining today as a concerned citizen and a current resident of a shared driveway community in the city. I work for a local builder and that's how I found out about this call. I'm shocked by the changes being considered and I'm not too excited about it. I've had a terrible experience in the shared driveway community

that I live in right now based on the parking issues. A lot of these homes are also being rented out, so the renters are flooding our shared driveways—forcing our guests to park on the street. We’ve had so many theft incidents in the area where cars are getting broken into. We’re all being forced to park on the street when we don’t want to. Trash bins get left everywhere—and to come together as an HOA has proven to be the biggest headache. I will never live in a shared driveway community again. We’re growing our family and look forward to the day when we can buy a front loader home in the city. We aspire to do that soon.

Allison Newport: I live in Shady Acres. I just want to thank you for trying to address these very complex issues—we see it all in this neighborhood. I understand that front loaders are very popular, but Shady Acres deals with some of the worst of these issues.

Meeting adjourned at 4:59 p.m.