



Meeting Notes

January 11, 2021

Call to Order

Recording started by Truscenia Garrett.

Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 3:02 p.m.

Welcome by Co-Chairs

Mr. Sonny Garza, Co-Chair took the roll and presented the speaker rules. 12 committee members were present during roll call. There were 65 participants.

Director's Report: Margaret Wallace Brown, Director, Planning & Development Department welcomed everyone to the meeting, mentioned the following:

- Residential buffering update: We've worked with a variety of City departments and stakeholders and have a draft. As soon as we have some redlined drafts from the City's legal department, we'll be able to share a draft with you.
- Conservation districts update: We have a good idea about how to move this forward and are working with the City's legal department now. We should have some updates on this next month.
- July 2021 Residential Survey Results Summary: We'll post the results of this survey on the project website by the end of the week.

Suvidha Bandi: Today's discussion points are:

- Benefits of compact development
- Recommendations for multiple units on an unrestricted lot
- Homework activity and next meeting
- Public comments

Benefits of Compact Development:

Colin Scarff: We organized the walkability conversation into three parts:

- The challenge
- The benefits of compact development
- What's needed to accommodate compact development

The Challenge:

- The region and city are growing
- Renter households are increasing within the city, while homeowner households are decreasing
- Single parent households dropped within the city and the county
- Non-family households grew at three times the rate of traditional (married couple) households
- Houston's current growth is focused on the edges of the city, within the Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ), where land is typically cheaper
- Sprawling land use and development patterns are more expensive to build and maintain than more compact development

Benefits of Compact Development (Fiscal):

- Building/expanding new roads/highways is not cheap
- Providing utilities and infrastructure at the edge of the city is expensive
- Maintaining existing infrastructure is already hard enough
- There are social and cost implications of “car culture”

Benefits of Compact Development (Schools). **Maps showing school population change between 2010-7.** See recording:

- Demographics, household size and where people live have major impacts on the school system
- Inner city schools are losing school-aged children
- School populations are moving to the city’s edges
- Compact development could counterbalance these demographic changes

Benefits of Compact Development (Environment):

- Sprawling development leads to a loss of natural habitat and open space
- Sprawling development increases impervious cover and damages streams, bayous and rivers
- Sprawling development increases greenhouse gases (GHGs) from increased driving
- Compact development could counterbalance these impacts

Benefits of Compact Development (People). **Map showing Houston’s ethnicity population distribution citywide.** See recording:

- Houston is very diverse yet very segregated
- Having more diverse people living in closer proximity supports previously established planning goals
- A larger variety of people means more support for local businesses

Benefits of Compact Development (Mobility):

- More people mean better support for public transit
- More people mean better support for pedestrian and bike infrastructure
- Multifamily unit residents tend to own fewer cars per household and lead to less traffic congestion

Benefits of Compact Development (Housing). **Graphic of missing middle housing types and diagram showing the unit cost variability based on different housing types.** See recording:

- Need more compact housing options to support more diverse house needs
- Need more missing middle housing options
- Housing diversity is a benefit of compact development
- Smaller units are more attainable to a greater variety of people
- More units on a lot tend to generate more taxable value—reducing the tax burden on the rest of the city

What’s needed to support compact development:

- Good design

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- Access to transit
 - Walking and biking options
 - A mix of uses
 - Housing choice
 - Infrastructure
 - Outdoor space
 - Cultural facilities
 - Social services

Benefits of Compact Development Questions? Comments?:

Tyron McDaniel: In our practice, we're finding a difference in the composition of families and how that leads to the housing choices that we should make available. For a lot of the renovation projects that we do, we're finding a lot of single person households or couples without kids. Probably 55% of the homeowners that we serve within the 610 Loop don't have kids or are single person households. Being able to provide different housing types that are within these areas that are walkable or accessible to amenities is key.

Curtis Davis: My question goes to the scope of this effort. A lot of what Colin presented requires coordination across policy that deals not only with what we allow but also public investment priorities and affordable housing development priorities. How do we see the work that we're doing as related to what we'll allow versus what requires multisectoral coordination to come together to facilitate this type of compact development?

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, there's a need for coordination to ensure that these goals are lining up. The reason we brought up the benefits of compact development is because we wanted to help attendees understand the importance of compact development and what we can do to take the city in the right direction. Yes, there are things that we might not be able to control at this point, but it's helpful to understand this context as we frame the solutions.

Curtis Davis: Are we in a position to make a charge through the Mayor's Office, the Building Department, the Permitting Department, the financing community, etc. to prioritize these types of developments? Will we have a strategic plan to enable this type of development beyond just regulatory content? Are there case studies that we can refer to of cities that have moved from a position where we are to a more coordinated approach? I want to ensure that developers pursue this.

Sonny Garza: Yes, we need to ensure that we have financial incentives to encourage the development and community to embrace these types of development. For example, in California and specifically San Diego, they have taken down all of the restrictions related to ADUs.

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, we're looking at many cities that are looking to missing middle housing in similar ways and are changing regulations. Many of these cities are reducing the parking regulations to make sure that there's room for homes instead of parking spaces. We're using these cities as a reference as we prepare recommendations.

Colin Scarff: Yes, we're trying to set the framework so that everyone's on the same page and ensure that we're all headed in the same direction. Hopefully, in this way, all city departments are moving in the same direction to set the stage for what we're trying to achieve. It's not easy to compare Houston to other cities primarily because of zoning. We're also in Texas, which has a different perspective on how it relates to regulations, especially when you compare it to California.

Sonny Garza: Yes, we're not doing this work in a vacuum. We're aiming to ensure that developers want to build these options.

Scott Cubbler: I'm the representative for the super neighborhood alliance and last night we had our monthly meeting. During the question-and-answer session, no less than five people addressed the issue with noise related to uses—bars, and other businesses that make it difficult to enjoy your property. Additional compact development incentivizes more of these types of businesses to move in. We must think about how future development and existing infrastructure go together, particularly related to stormwater and flooding. Yes, we need to incentive new development, but we also don't want to negatively impact existing development.

Sonny Garza: Yes, we need to consider this, but the lack of zoning makes this challenging.

Margaret Wallace Brown: As we start to talk about compact development, the challenge is about achieving the benefits of a 15-minute city without degrading existing neighborhoods' quality of life. The balance can be found. We have a weak noise ordinance, but it's not necessarily my area of expertise. The purpose of this Committee is to explore these competing interests that contribute to Houstonians' quality of life. Your opinions will help us strike that balance.

Scott Cubbler: Thank you. When thinking of city services, garbage is another big issue too.

Margaret Wallace Brown: The counter argument is that more compact development can help with improving city services. Compact cities provide city services in a much more efficient way than spread out cities.

Scott Cubbler: Agreed. I just want to make sure that I bring up the issues raised during the super neighborhood alliance meetings.

Mike Dishberger: The school discussion was interesting. This is basically a planning meeting. Related to development incentives—I don't need money incentives. I need more nuance beyond commercial permits. For Public Works, it's a one-size-fits-all approach. We want to build things like you're showing with alleys, but the requirements are so challenging. We need more variety than just residential or commercial. I'm being forced to build a certain style of development based on the current regulations. All these great ideas aren't going to work unless you have buy-in from Public Works. I have a builder friend in California, and I think the Houston way without zoning is more beneficial. It allows more housing to be built where old commercial used to be. We need to focus on getting buy-in from Public Works.

Yuhayna Mahmud: Internally at Metro right now, we're looking at facilities where we have opportunities to provide housing closer to transit centers or even on our own properties and facilities. We understand that there's a need for more affordable housing and for more density near transit. Curtis Davis mentioned alignment across initiatives—we at Metro are aligned with this mission.

Recommendations for Multiple Units on an Unrestricted Lot:

Suvidha: The problem is that we want to right size development regulations associated with infill development on properties not restricted to single family residential use and promote naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH). Some of our goals include:

- Allow variety of home options (triplexes, fourplexes, etc.)
- Increase affordability
- Promote urban infill development
- Encourage other transit modes

To recap from our previous meeting on this topic in 2021. A single family residential lot is different than an unrestricted lot. We're not talking about single family residential lots today. We're talking about unrestricted lots where multiple units are already allowed on a lot. This is not something that we're suddenly allowing today.

Single family residential lots: (1) include active single family residential deed restrictions or platted single family restrictions; (2) do not allow more than 2 units per lot; (3) can include detached or attached units; and (4) allows accessory dwelling units (ADUs) that are not larger than 900 square feet.

Unrestricted lots: (1) include no active single family deed restrictions or platted single family restrictions; (2) allow multiple units per lot; (3) can include detached and attached units; and (4) have no unit size limits. Today, if you're building 4 units or 40 units on a lot, the development and permit requirements are the same on these lots. This makes building small-scale multifamily units challenging to build. **Graphic examples of small-scale multi-family housing that would require a multi-family permit to build today.** See recording.

Current development regulations for lots without single family residential restrictions. **Flowchart showing the City's current permit options and development requirements for unrestricted lots.** See recording.

Proposed development regulations for lots without single family residential restrictions. This proposal creates a special permit option for 3-8 unit residential projects. **Venn diagram showing the new "multi-unit residential (MUR)" permit option.** See recording.

Proposed performance standard recommendations for the "multi-unit residential (MUR)" permit option. **Flowchart showing the proposed permit option for 3-8 unit residential projects.** See recording:

- Maximum site of 15,000 square feet
- 3 units minimum
- Must be code compliant to qualify as residential (code amendments in the future)

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- 28' private street not needed when fire safety is met (150' deep lot max)
 - 5' space around the buildings – providing a clear walkable path
 - Maximum 60% building coverage
 - No more than 2-3 stories with total height of 30'
 - Maintain green space or permeable area (certain percentage of the site)
 - 10' front building line with pedestrian connections to the sidewalk (parking located in the back)
 - Building along the street must face the street
 - 1 parking space per unit (for units less than 1000 square regardless of the bedrooms)
 - No parking minimum if within ¼ mile of transit (rail, high frequency bus, boost, transit station, park & ride) and along high comfort bike paths
 - Off-site parking allowed
 - Guest parking – 1 space per every 6 units
 - Incentives for keeping existing dwelling units (reduced parking)
 - Driveway width of 12' with 4' curb radius

Recommendations for Multiple Units on an Unrestricted Lot Questions? Comments?:

Curtis Davis: To facilitate permitting and dealing with Public Works, is it practical to consider a special interdisciplinary review type for this proposed 3-8 units permit option to expediate quality reviews and timetables that would facilitate higher development production rates? It would also require some consultation between the Director and her colleagues as to whether it would be feasible.

Peter Freedman: Related to the 5' space around buildings, how does that impact setbacks? Is it specifically between the buildings that we're talking about or are you creating a different standard for a side setback where you need to have 5' of walkable space when that's currently not the standard?

Suvidha Bandi: The Fire Department has informed us that they need 5' around buildings to help fight fires.

Peter Freedman: I'm not sure that I understand where they're coming from. I'd love to hear more about why they feel that 5' is required versus 4' or 3'. I ask because the new standards allow us to go to 3' with fire standards up to an hour. Realistically, 3-4' should be enough to get around. Related to driveways, shrinking this 12' width down as you past the building would make this easier. Maybe decrease the width to 8-10' along the building? Everything else looks good. I like the concept. Can we just make this the single family standard?

Suvidha Bandi: The 12' driveway width requirement is the width of the driveway opening where the street and property meet. Once you have that opening, within your property, you can reduce the width further. Right now, the minimum dimension for residential is 12'.

Peter Freedman: Did you say that you are allowed to narrow below 12' once you're inside the property?

Richard Smith: The 12' requirement is from the street to the property line—what we call a “driveway approach”. From the property line in, we don’t have a say about how wide that driveway is. So, if you wanted to take it down to 10', that’s flatwork inside the property, and that’s not within our jurisdiction on a non-commercial site.

Mike Dishberger: These are great ideas. The word “driveway” might not be the right term. There are lots of residential properties in Houston with 8' wide driveways. The driveway minimum probably doesn’t need to be wider than 8'. I’m in favor of all of this to get more affordable units on a property that aren’t necessarily an apartment complex. There are a lot of parts of town where this would fit perfectly—let’s keep this up.

Tyron McDaniel: Yes, these are proactive steps that will truly benefit the city. Being able to still have a property be considered residential, which aligns with financing practices (4 units or less), is great. Aligning these small-scale multifamily standards with the residential standards would make a huge difference and would help people afford units in nicer neighborhoods. The driveway width parking standards recommended would also help a lot. I love where we’re going with this, and this new residential designation would help make our city more affordable and equitable.

Sandy Stevens: I’m concerned with allowing up to 8 units without any additional dedicated parking. This would be a problem in my neighborhood. I understand that we’re a changing society, but where I live, you still need a car to get to a grocery store, and most of the people who live here have a car. You would be putting more cars on our streets where we already have significant parking issues due to the destination that our neighborhood is. We’re already part of a community parking plan to try to address the parking problems that we have here. That’s a concern for me as a resident. Overall, I do like the plan but I do have significant concerns related to on street parking.

Sonny Garza: Yes, that’s something that we need to address. We want to avoid unintended consequences. There might be some areas where this approach doesn’t work.

Homework:

Lynn Henson: Visit Let’s Talk Houston/Livable Places to:

- Read the National Association of Home Builders report, *Diversifying Housing Options with Smaller Lots and Smaller Homes*
- Read the Kinder Institute article, *Houston Hopes More Homeowners Will Embrace Housing Literally in Their Backyard*
- Read the Single Family Residential Survey results

Next Meeting: February 8th

Public Comment:

George Frey: I had a comment about the high density needs that Colin mentioned. The problem with these smaller unrestricted lots (under 15,000 square feet) is that in my area there are many unrestricted lots that are significantly larger. Those unrestricted lots are being converted into high-density single family houses that are

coming in just barely below the performance standard cut offs mentioned today. The implications of shared driveways with fire access become increasingly problematic when dealing with multi acre sites that are trying to shove in that many single family houses. We're looking for more perspective on some of those larger unrestricted lots that require more citywide planning. I also have a question about the highway capacity manual's pedestrian level of safety. This wasn't brought up today, but I know a lot of jurisdictions are moving away from measuring pedestrian safety in this way. Houston's still using this manual's standards. Is there a plan going forward to look at other methodologies that evaluate intersection design from a more pedestrian perspective? I also mentioned some questions last time and am wondering when there might be a follow up to these public questions.

Suvidha Bandi: I had an opportunity to talk to Mr. Frey. Some of the concerns that were brought up are about larger sites. Today we're only discussing lot sizes up to 15,000 square feet. In the future, we're going to talk about single family lots and what kinds of standards that we'll be making recommendations on. Please stay tuned for the work coming up on this topic. In the meantime, I'm happy to answer any other questions that you may have offline.

Kevin Strickland: I wanted to bring up the noise ordinance again. I was on last night's call with the mayor. The mayor was defensive of the noise ordinance, and he repeated that not having zoning makes this tricky to regulate. Translating the problem this way means that businesses have a unilateral and unlimited right to take the public space. Until we reframe the discussion to say that we all own public space, we're not going to make any progress on this. The mayor did commit to revisiting this discussion. In the work that you're doing, I would ask that you focus on centering people and not cars. When we talk about compact development, a lot of what drives the discussion is getting people around to their houses by cars and that will always get us into trouble. The stuff that Walkable Places and Livable Places is doing is tinkering at the edges of the changes that we need to make. 50% of Houston is unwalkable. Over the years, I haven't seen any organization addressing how to fix that problem. There's nothing that's happening to backfill the changes that we need to close that 50% walkability gap. I would challenge, in the work that you're doing, to look at the blocked rights-of-way, broken sidewalks, and the sidewalk exception policy which already in 2021 has generated hundreds of sidewalk exceptions. Until we address those issues, we're never going to get to the walkability, livability, and compact housing that you all are working on.

Meeting adjourned at 4:33 p.m.