Building Consensus for Form-Based Code

Austin’s Commercial Design Standards Ordinance and VMU Overlay
Welcome to Austin.
Welcome to the rest of Austin.
In 2003, a battle over a big box got a lot of Austinites thinking about how to encourage higher-quality commercial development.
As an early step, we invited national consultant Robert Gibbs to rate Austin’s commercial development.

On a scale of 0-10, Austin’s score was between 0 and 1.
As we began discussions of how to turn things around, we started by talking about façade details.

But soon realized that good design is about building placement and streetscapes, not construction materials.
Through Envision Central Texas, the community agreed that sprawl is environmentally unsound and fiscally irresponsible. . .

But how can we change?
## Three Years of Consensus-Building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2003</td>
<td>Stakeholder meetings began</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2004</td>
<td>City Council approves resolution setting goal of improving Austin’s design standards.</td>
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<td>Spring-Summer 2004</td>
<td>Surveys and stakeholder work continues.</td>
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<td>November 2004</td>
<td>Draft policy document completed.</td>
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<td>May 2005</td>
<td>City Council approves Design Standards policy document.</td>
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<td>Spring 2006</td>
<td>Stakeholder negotiations result in VMU Overlay.</td>
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<td>May 2006</td>
<td>Clarion Associates completes draft codification of Design Standards.</td>
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<td>August 2006</td>
<td>Council passes final Design Standards ordinance.</td>
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Diverse Stakeholder Group

Over 200 stakeholders from groups including:

• The Real Estate Council of Austin
• Austin Neighborhoods Council
• Architects
• Affordable Housing advocates
• Design and Planning Commissioners
• New Urban developers
• The Quick-Service Food Industry
Plus three major community charettes. . .

. . . about a zillion marked-up drafts. . .

And many important lessons learned.
What Matters in a Form-Based Code?

Details that enhance the pedestrian experience:

- Mixed use
- Abundant windows
- Wide sidewalks with trees
- Buildings oriented to the street
- Parallel or head-in parking
- Small blocks on an interconnected grid system (mostly 660’ by 330’, with a maximum 660’ by 660’)
- Finding target locations where density can feed itself: corridors or dying malls and strip centers
What matters in the consensus-building process?

- Establish the context for change: why failure is not an option.
- Include all stakeholder groups.
- Listen to interests, not positions.
- Commit to 100% consensus.
- Get an elected official personally involved and invested.
What doesn’t matter:

(Or at least isn’t worth the headache.)

• Façade materials
• Parking caps
• Rigid adherence to every element of textbook “good design.”
Austin’s Innovations

- Citywide applicability
- Affordable housing
- Green building for national retailers
- Block size standards
- The VMU Overlay
Case study in building consensus:

The Vertical Mixed-Use Overlay
What is VMU?
Developers got onboard because the VMU Overlay gave them the opportunity to build about 50% more density.

Plus, the Overlay made parking reductions voluntary, and allowed parallel or head-in “teaser” parking.
Citizens welcomed VMU design. . .

. . . But had all the normal fears about density and traffic.
Consensus-building tool #1: Density “sweeteners”

- Affordable housing
- Residential permit parking program
- High streetscape standards

Plus, height was non-negotiable.
Consensus-building tool #2: The opt-in/opt-out process

• Neighborhood groups can recommend to Council that certain properties on Core Transit Corridors be “opted out” of the VMU dimensional and parking bonuses.

• Neighborhoods who “opt out” properties lose the opportunity for affordable housing and the other sweeteners.

• Be careful to make the process simple and direct.
Consensus-building tool #3: Balance preservation with change

The McMansion Ordinance
The Result:
Growing agreement that form-based code is the way to ensure new development will be better than what it replaces.

How do we know?
“Northcross Mall should become a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use village center, consistent with the city’s New Urbanist direction for redevelopment.”

-- Hope Morrison, Responsible Growth for Northcross.  
Austin-American Statesman  
January 31, 2007
Questions?

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www.ci.austin.tx.us/development/commercial_design.htm