

# 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. . .

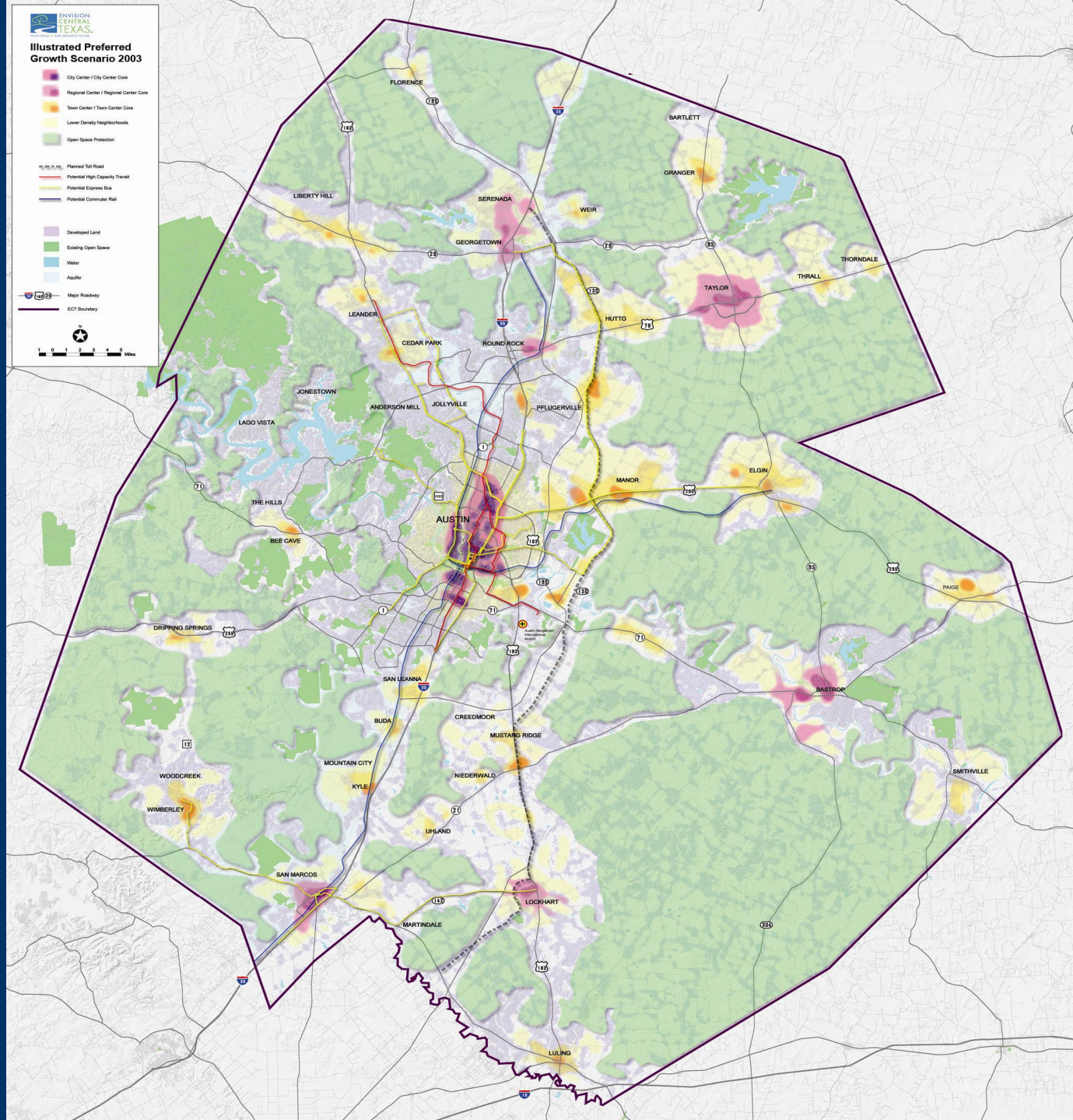


But soon realized that good design is about building placement and streetscapes, not construction materials.



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

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



# 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:*

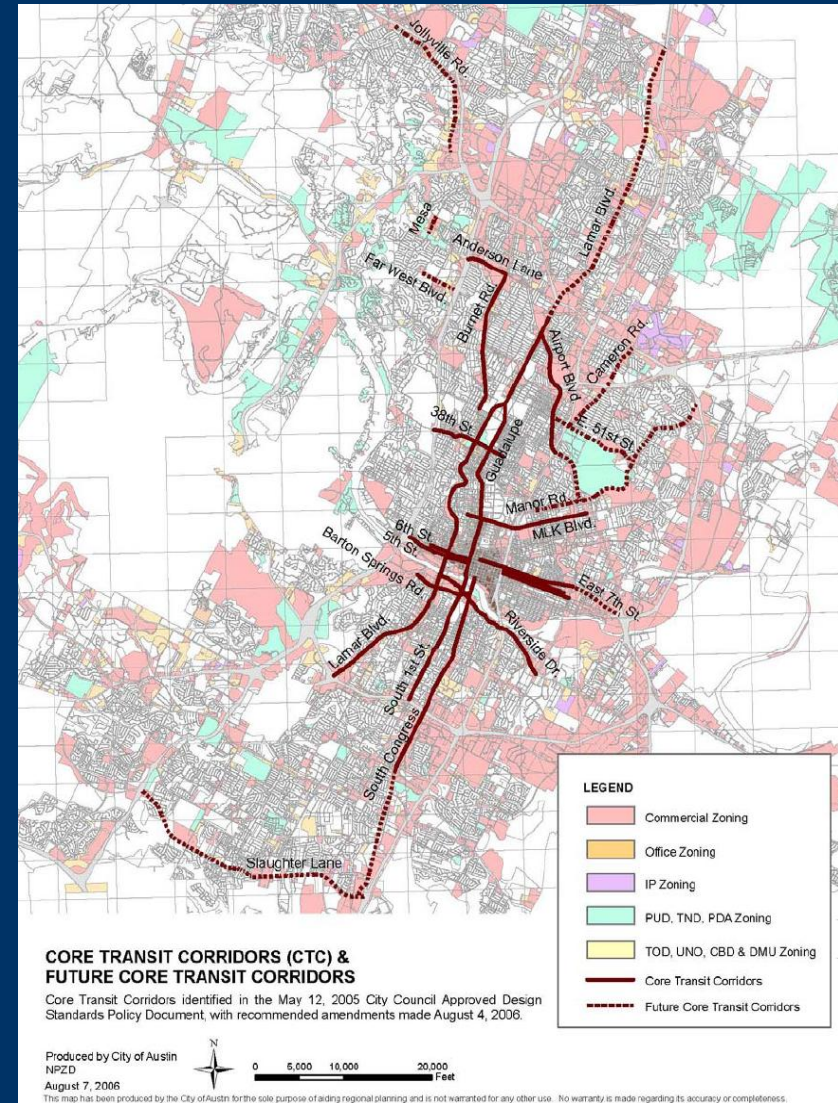
(Or at least isn't worth the headache.)

- 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





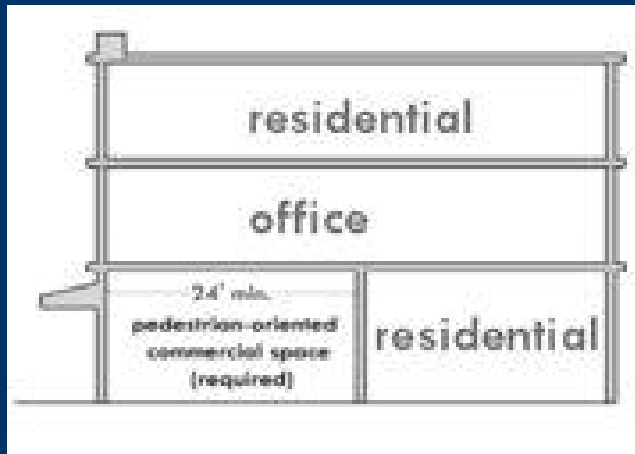
# Case study in building consensus:



## 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



Proposal for the Northcross Redevelopment



# Questions?

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