

"We are excited that the long awaited 'Imagine Austin' designated Harris Branch as a "Town Center," something we have believed since the opening of SH130. This 197 page comprehensive plan should prove to be a good direction for Austin for years to come."

Imagine Austin describes a town center as a mix of commercial and residential uses that support high capacity transit and an area ranging in size between 10,000-30,000 new people and 5,000-20,000 new jobs.

John McCullough  
Senior Vice President  
*The Galesi Group*

## **Blunt Bold Proposal Imagines Austin's Growth Over 30 Years.**

Marty Toohey

*Austin American Statesman*

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After two years of debates and committee meetings, Austin officials have unveiled a broad vision for growth that condemns traditional suburban development and is garnering both praise and skepticism.

The proposed, 197-page "comprehensive plan" would be the city's official philosophy for managing a booming population and the new housing, businesses, shops and restaurants that will come with it. The plan, dubbed Imagine Austin, envisions mixed-use development along corridors serviced by transit and new centers of housing and commerce miles north and south of downtown.

The plan is intended to guide every city decision over the next three decades, from where to allow construction to how much to collect in taxes to managing the economy.

It is unusually blunt for a municipal document. It talks of rectifying past mistakes. It plans around big-ticket initiatives such as urban rail or significantly expanded bus service.

And it excoriates the city's rapid suburban growth, stating that the pattern of the past 60 years came "at a troubling price in terms of social segregation and isolation, (diminished) public health, air and water quality, loss of natural open space and agricultural lands, and climate change (while) driving up the public costs for roads, water lines and other infrastructure that must be continually extended to far-flung new development."

The document assumes that 700,000 more people will move into the city over the next 30 years, creating civic pressures the city should address. The plan was compiled by the city planning staff, which distilled input from the

general public and a sometimes quarrelsome, 31-member citizen committee appointed by the City Council.

More public meetings are coming. The first is at 10 a.m. Saturday, a "kickoff party" with music at the George Washington Carver Museum & Cultural Center in East Austin.

The city will continue taking public input and could make changes until spring, when the City Council is scheduled to adopt a final plan.

After that, the city staff will spend another year writing the ordinances necessary to eventually make the plan a reality.



*Larry Kolvoord/AMERICAN-STATESMAN*

Ideas in the Imagine Austin plan include mixed-use development along transit lines. The City Council is set to adopt a final plan next spring.

"We think this is a vision that reflects what the public wants for this city," said Garner Stoll, the city planner overseeing the comprehensive plan.

But the plan, although generally in line with Austin's environmental vibe, proposes a philosophy that Central City neighborhoods have become increasingly leery of over the past decade, associating it with expensive condominium towers and a rising cost of living.

The plan calls for a range of housing options — not just apartments and condos — that would be located closer to where people shop and work, Stoll said.

"It's probably going to involve more shared walls," Stoll said. "But we're not going to see an instant reversal" in where people want to live.

Some say the plan is unrealistic. Ed Wendler Jr., a developer, noted that most apartment and condominium units are smaller than most families prefer. And influential neighborhood activists, worried about bearing the brunt of growth, could make even those difficult to build along the city-core thoroughfares such as North Lamar Boulevard, South Congress Avenue and Springdale Road, as envisioned in the plan.

That would leave the city's fringes as the logical place for most growth to happen, Wendler said.

"Families will not stop wanting that lifestyle," he said. "All (Imagine Austin) is going to do is push families out to Round Rock, Pflugerville, Manor, Kyle, Buda or the unincorporated areas around Austin. There is a lot of reality that will get in the way of this vision."

Imagine Austin touts the city's natural beauty, relatively resilient economy, music scene and an overall quality of life.

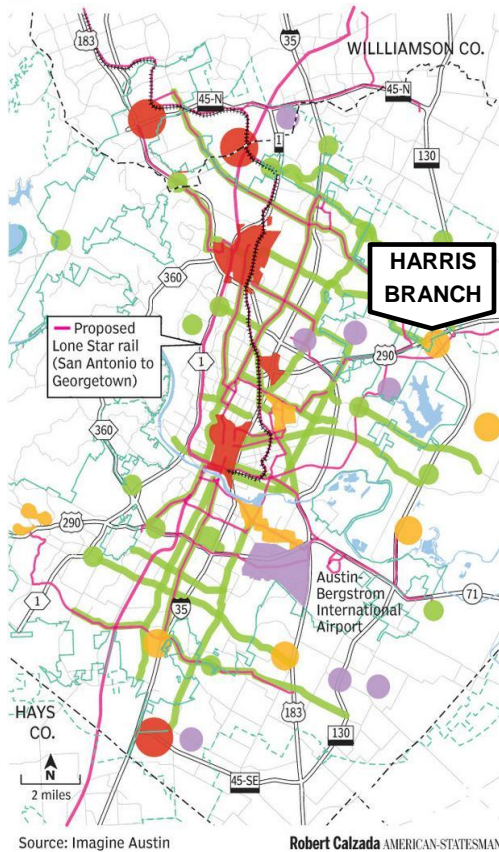
But the document also notes that Austin has among the nation's worst

## Proposed growth plan

The City of Austin is proposing a new comprehensive plan — intended to guide all city policy — that would concentrate growth mainly in dense clusters and along thoroughfares like North Lamar Boulevard. The plan is highly critical of the city's traditional suburban growth patterns.

### Land use

- Regional center
- Town center
- Neighborhood center
- Mixed-use corridor
- Job center
- High capacity transit
- City of Austin
- Austin extra-territorial jurisdiction
- MetroRail



traffic congestion, an increasingly strained water supply, rising housing costs, a reliance on low-wage jobs that don't keep pace with the rising cost of living, and "a sense of loss about a simpler Austin of the past."

"Most troubling," the plan states, "at least 20 percent of our children live in poverty, go to bed hungry, go without health insurance and adequate health care, and fail to graduate from high school."

Imagine Austin also notes that "poverty and people of color both are concentrated east" of Interstate 35 — the lingering result of a comprehensive plan adopted in the 1920s that made apartheid official city policy at the time.

Imagine Austin addresses most every issue of governance in general terms. For instance, it calls for more robust partnerships between the city, businesses, schools and nonprofits to create more job-training programs.

It also cautions that government should not work at cross-purposes with the market. It calls for the city to use its two main powers — zoning and taxation — to encourage densely packed, walkable clusters of homes and businesses along transit lines, some still planned, but far from reality.

Several of those hubs are along the proposed Lone Star Rail District line, which was created by the state Legislature in 1997 to manage a San Antonio-to-Georgetown commuter route that has not yet materialized.

Whether city leaders have the political will to carry out Imagine Austin remains an open question.

The last such comprehensive plan, passed in phases in the 1970s and updated in the early 1980s, was promptly left on a shelf to gather dust. Instead, the city adopted numerous smaller-scale plans, from those charting the course of individual neighborhoods to one governing the city electric utility's 10-year environmental goals.

But even those plans were sometimes ignored in favor of case-by-case decision-making.

Dave Sullivan, chairman of the city's Planning Commission, said Imagine Austin will not be allowed to mold because the city charter now requires it to be reviewed every year and officially updated every five years.

"If we made mistakes" in creating it, Sullivan said, "we can correct them. It's not a be-all, end-all."