

Liveable City Community News

Spring 2009

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Save the Date:

Annual Vision Awards, May 20 @ MACC

Mark your calendars now for Wednesday evening, May 20. That's the date for Liveable City's annual Vision Awards party, located this year in the beautiful Mexican American Cultural Center, 600 River Street.

In keeping with the vision theme, we'll be giving awards for each of the big E's: Economics, Environment, Equity, Engagement and Esthetics. We've got some surprises this year so stay tuned for details.

Tickets and sponsorships will be available soon. To learn about sponsorship opportunities, please contact John-Michael Cortez at jmvcortez@gmail.com

**Picking a Comprehensive Plan Team:
Get Answers April 7, 6pm, Conley-Guerrero Center**

Sure, it sounds like a snoozefest, but a Comprehensive Plan is arguably the most important document a city can create. A well-considered Comprehensive Plan provides a blueprint for how we grow and what matters most to us as a community. Whatever we put on paper today will determine how we live tomorrow – so we sure as heck better pay attention when it happens.

Liveable City has long supported the concept of a Comprehensive Plan, as have the City's Planning Commissioners, many of whom pulled yeoman's duty to initiate this vital project. Of course, community buy-in is a key element in any successful planning effort – so we were more than a little surprised when city staff announced residents would have only five days to vet the finalist teams before the city picked a firm to lead the project. As one observer noted, this was the same time it would take to approve a hammer purchase. To make matters worse, three of the five days fell over a holiday weekend and available information on the three finalists was scant.

Working with other community leaders, Liveable City argued for more detailed information about the finalist firms and a reasonable length of time in which to evaluate it. As a result, Austin City Council members postponed the decision and instead hosted a March 4th forum to gather questions from concerned residents to be submitted to the finalist teams.

Responses will be publicly available March 27, with a second Community Forum scheduled for Tuesday, April 7, at the Conley-Guerrero Center, 808 Nile Street. City Council will vote on the finalists April 23, in what many hope will be a more informed decision.

If you care about how we live tomorrow, now's the time to get involved. For more information, visit <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/compplan/>. To read Liveable City's resolution on the Comprehensive Plan process, see www.liveablecity.org

**Troubling Trends:
Comprehensive Housing Market Study**

On March 5th, the Austin City Council heard some sobering facts about the dwindling stock of affordable housing and its effects on our community. The Comprehensive Housing Market Study, produced by BBC Research & Consulting of Denver, painted a disturbing picture:

- Austin housing costs increased 85% over the last 10 years.
- Austin workers – especially retail workers – are being pushed out of town by high housing prices.
- Recent UT grads and young people are leaving Austin due to high housing costs.
- Austin lacks affordable housing for 29,000 households.
- To improve the situation, Austin needs to add at least 1000 new housing units a year affordable to households earning \$20K or less.
- 23 separate ordinances related to development in the last 18 months have increased development costs.

The research group offered ten recommendations to combat these trends, including elements that should logically fall within the scope of Austin's upcoming Comprehensive Plan (see above). As the Comp Plan moves forward, Liveable City will be working hard to ensure that affordable housing and other important social needs are fully addressed. We hope everyone who calls Austin home will do the same.

See the entire Comprehensive Housing Market Study Here:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/housing/apr08chms.htm>

Public School Accountability: Why Closing Schools Is Not The Answer

After months of public discussions in communities around the state, one thing is clear: Texans of all political stripes agree that our current school accountability system simply isn't working.

In recent months, Liveable City's Education Committee has been partnering with Save Texas Schools, a growing coalition local of parents, educators and community leaders to push for real reform in Texas' school accountability laws. The group has targeted a 2006 Texas law that triggers automatic closure or alternative management of a school if any student sub-group fails to gain an acceptable rating in any area of the TAKS test for five consecutive years. Due to Texas' unique labeling system, a handful of low test scores in a different sub-group each year may set an otherwise improving campus on the path to closure. Even the

Texas Education Commissioner is powerless to stop an automatic school closure under this law, no matter the circumstances.

School closure is not supported by data as a best practice for student achievement. In fact, research shows that academic achievement typically drops every time a student changes schools. The automatic closure law also disproportionately affects our most at-risk students – every school on the current list for closure serves a low-income, diverse population.

Several bills have already been filed to address this issue and Liveable City is working with Save Texas Schools to incorporate these provisions into the omnibus school accountability bills (HB 3, SB 3). To learn more about this issue and how you can be a voice for change, please visit www.SaveTexasSchools.com.

Hail to the Co-chairs: Meet Liveable City's 2009 Board Officers

Like many folks, Liveable City was so swept up in Obama inaugural fever that we completely forgot to mention our own swearing-in ceremony in January. That's when LC's new 2009 board officers took the oath, albeit without bibles or ballgowns.

For the first time, the Liveable City board is headed by a pair of co-chairs, Brian Donovan and Danny Roth. A longtime supporter of the arts and progressive causes, Brian Donovan works as General Administrator for the nonprofit University of Texas Inter-Cooperative Council and serves on the board of Austin CarShare. Danny Roth holds a master's degree from UT's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and is a principal partner in Southwest Strategies, where he played a key role in preserving and transforming historic Penn Field, among many other projects.

Liveable City's 2009 officers also include Vice Chair Susan Moffat, Treasurer Kurt Kogler, and Secretary David Foster. Of course, abundant thanks are due to former board chair Mark Yznaga, who recently stepped down after two years of outstanding service. If you see our new board officers out and about, remember, it's never too late for a toast!

New Hand on Deck: Liveable City Increases Outreach with New Coordinator

Liveable City is pleased to welcome Heidi Gibbons as our new Outreach and Membership Coordinator beginning this month. Ms. Gibbons'

professional background includes experience in development, volunteer recruitment, event planning, and outreach for a number of Austin-area nonprofits. She has previously worked with Austin Metropolitan Ministries (now AAIM), Family Eldercare, and People's Community Clinic, among others.

In tough economic times, it's especially important that our public policies work for everyone. With Heidi's help, LC looks forward to reaching out and engaging more people about the issues that really matter to our community.

Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes: Check Out Liveable City's Fresh Address

Spring is a great time for fresh starts and Liveable City will kick off April with a new office. Look for us at 3823 Airport Boulevard on the southeast corner of Airport and 38-1/2 Street. Our new neighbors include KOOP Radio and Anthropos Arts so you know we're in good company.

And now, a word *for* our Sponsors...

Building a more Liveable City isn't cheap! Special recognition goes to the Shield-Ayers Foundation, the Rather Family Trust, the Trull Foundation, and the Greater Houston Family Foundation's Gray Family Fund whose generous help makes our work possible. For a complete list of our wonderful partners and supporters, please visit www.liveablecity.org.

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