

Liveable City
Community News
April 2010

In this issue:

Liveable Vision Awards, May 12, 6pm-8:30pm, @ MACC

Weigh in on Comp Plan during April SPEAK WEEK

LC Grades New City Incentives Process

Waller Creek District Plan: Wednesday, April 7, 6pm-8pm @ MACC

Leaner Look for Fall Transpo Bond Election

LC Supports Austin Energy's Generation Plan

Sizing Up Alley Flats

Shout Outs...

Liveable City 2010 Vision Award Party:
Get your tickets now at www.liveablecity.org

Liveable City is spiffing up for its 7th annual Liveable Vision Awards party, slated for Wednesday, May 12, 6pm-8:30pm, at the Mexican American Cultural Center, 600 River Street.

Mark your calendars now to toast the following local heroes:

- **Economy:** Austin Independent Business Alliance <http://www.ibuyaustin.com/>
- **Engagement:** *Franklin Gardens/ Chestnut Neighborhood Revitalization Corporation*
<http://chestnutaustin.blogspot.com/2009/05/cnrc.html>
- **Environment:** Sustainable Food Center <http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org/>
- **Equity:** *TexHealth Central Texas* <http://www.texhealthcentraltex.org/>
- **Esthetics:** *Sunflowers – An Electric Garden*
<http://muellersunflowers.powerdash.com/>

It's a terrific party – great food, drink and company guaranteed! For tickets or sponsorships, please visit www.liveablecity.org

SPEAK WEEK Plus: Weigh in on Comp Plan at April Events

April marks the release of the Draft Vision Statement for our city's Comprehensive Plan. Embodying the shared hopes and dreams for our city, the Vision Statement was created with the input of thousands of people in our community over a 5-month public outreach process helmed by Imagine Austin. It's a first concrete step toward a final Comp Plan that will set the course for how Austin develops over the next 30 years.

Now you'll have another chance to make your voice heard during SPEAK WEEK, April 20-29. Throughout this time, Imagine Austin will engage the public in an innovative listening campaign, reaching Austinites where they live, work and play to find out what's important to them. At spots all across town, you'll be able to weigh in on the Draft Vision Statement, learn about how we're growing as a city, and say what matters to you as we plan for Austin's future.

Also slated for late April and early May, a second round of community forums will examine Austin's current conditions and anticipated growth. Again, you'll have the chance to comment on the plan or work in small groups to identify the best places for growth within Austin and outside the city boundaries in its Extra Territorial Jurisdiction.

Be heard this month. Visit www.imagineaustin.net for more info, including forum dates and locations.

Let's Make a Deal: LC Grades New City Incentive Process

In 2008, Liveable City released a groundbreaking study on Austin's use of public economic incentives. *Building a More Sustainable Economy: Economic Development Strategy and Public Incentives in Austin*, authored by LC Board Member and UT regional planner Dr. Michael Oden, led to significant changes in the how the city awards financial incentives, a marked departure from the murky practices that spawned such controversial corporate bonanzas as the Domain deal. (Download the full report www.liveablecity.org/docs/LC_Incentive-Study.pdf).

Today, Austin's revised incentives process is more transparent, provides better data, and allows more time for informed decision-making. But how is it working on the ground? Oden offers a mixed review of four recent deals that have come through under the new rules.

He begins by noting that three of the four recent incentive deals involved smaller scale company expansions or relocations. In the past, these types of facilities would have quietly located in Austin without any direct public subsidy. That said, he gives high marks to the Hangar Orthopedics package, which he says was well handled, fairly scored by city staff, and included great engagement and corporate citizenship from the Hangar's corporate leaders. He also gives a passing grade to the recent Facebook deal, which offers 200 new jobs at an average annual salary of \$54K in exchange for \$200,000 from the city over ten years.

But two other recent incentive packages don't fare so well in Oden's assessment. LegalZoom, an online legal document service, should have raised a red flag for its tenuous long-term business model, given that most of its forms can be downloaded for free elsewhere on the internet. Worse, the company's median wage for its first 150 hires is only \$31K per year, meaning a number of salaries will be below that figure – not even close to a living wage for Austin. Though the city's only on the hook for \$200K, staff scoring for the LegalZoom deal involved grade padding of the worst sort, which Oden calls “an embarrassing distortion of the process.” In short, the LegalZoom deal sets a dangerous precedent that earns it a D-minus.

Similar concerns apply to the \$354,000 Council recently approved to lure Yingli Green Energy, a Chinese solar company, to Austin. Should the plant open here, workers will get only \$13.50 per hour, far below a livable wage for this area (the matrix also characterized the project as a “national headquarters,” when the reality is closer to a branch plant). Even though the money isn't huge, this precedent could come back to haunt Austin. “If you give public resources to one company for low-wage jobs, how do you say no to the next dozen or so who line up with their hands out for the same deal?” asks Oden. He says that it is very discouraging that the new incentive process has not led the City Council to more rationally discriminate between good and bad incentive deals.

Oden thinks that the flurry of incentive asks might continue with a campaigning Governor Rick Perry busy cranking cash out of the state's Enterprise Fund (he's told Texas cities the spigot is open and is offering large state incentive grants if cities match with a smaller share). But whether the source is our state purse or local wallet, these are still public dollars. Shouldn't they be targeted to companies that pay enough for Texans to live on?

Jump Into the Waller Creek District Plan: Wednesday, April 7, 6pm-8pm @ MACC

The Waller Creek Master Plan is on the homestretch, but there's still a chance for some tweaking at this week's Town Hall meeting, Wednesday, April 7, 6pm-8pm at Mexican American Cultural Center, 600 Red River. ROMA Design Group will be on hand to present the current draft master plan for the Waller Creek District and take feedback.

The April 7th meeting is the final step in a series of public outreach efforts by the city over the last year to ensure a community voice in Waller's design. Your comments will be used to further refine the draft Master Plan before it's sent to the Planning Commission and Austin City Council for discussion and approval. For more information, visit <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/wallercreek/>.

Paring It Down: Leaner Look for Fall Transportation Bond Election

It's official: rail is off the Austin ballot for this November. The proposed \$400 million-plus city transportation bond, which would have included funding for streetcars, has been postponed to 2011 or 2012. Instead, the city's fall bond proposal has been pared down to \$100 million, targeted to unknown mix of roads, sidewalks, bicycle infrastructure, trails and other transportation-related investments – but no rail. The Austin City Council will appoint a small citizen committee for a quick review of the bond proposal in the short time remaining before it must head back to Council for a pre-ballot blessing.

For a closer look at why the Mayor decided to postpone the rail election, see www.mayorleffingwell.com/blogPost.asp?ID=104

For Liveable City's take on building a balanced transportation system, visit http://www.liveablecity.org/docs/Liveable_City%20Transportation_Principles.pdf

Clean Energy for Austin: Liveable City Supports Austin Energy's Generation Plan

Livable City has joined Clean Energy for Austin, adding its voice to a growing coalition that calls on the Austin City Council to adopt the Austin Energy Generation Plan, including critical recommendations approved by the Austin Generation Resource Planning Task Force. To learn more about this important effort and how you can help, visit <http://www.cleanenergyforaustin.org/>.

Sizing Up Alley Flats: City Hall Show through April 9

Now's the time to find out about the Alley Flat Initiative, a growing effort designed to promote sustainable affordable infill housing in Austin. As the name implies, these small secondary residential units are often accessed through Austin's extensive network of existing alleys. The project is collaboration between the Austin Community Design and Development Center, the University of Texas Center for Sustainable Development, and the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation.

To learn more, stop by the Alley Flat exhibition at City Hall through April 9 (LC is a proud co-sponsor of this informative show). Or visit the Initiative's website at <http://www.thealleyflatinitiative.org/>

Shout Outs:

MetroRail Opens! Finally, we're on track with this small but important step for Austin's transit future.

Health Care Reform Passes! Not perfect, but still a miracle. Kudos to all our local heroes who have worked for health care tirelessly over the years – we'll need you even more to make sure Texas adopts the reforms. And a special Shout Out to Congressman Lloyd Doggett for his great work on this critical issue.

Facebook comes to town. Celebrate by friending LC at <http://www.facebook.com/livablecity>.

Congrats to Scott Swearingen on his new book, *Environmental City*, a history of the environmental movement in Austin and the deeper effort to retain a sense of place that continues to shape the way Austin is built today. Visit www.environmentalcityaustin.com or drop by the St. Ed's book signing, April 15, 7-9, Ragsdale Center, Mabee Ballroom C, St. Edwards University.

The Austin Bulldog is here! Check out veteran reporter Ken Martin's latest launch – nonprofit investigative journalism with bite. <http://www.theaustinbulldog.org/>