



Meeting Notes

April 5, 2021

Call to Order

Recording started by Tamara Fou.

Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m.

Welcome by Co-Chairs

Mr. Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, took the roll and presented the speaker rules. 16 committee members were present during roll call. There were 93 participants.

Director's Report: Margaret Wallace Brown, Director, Planning & Development Department welcomed everyone to the meeting and mentioned the following:

- The goal of the Livable Places Action Committee is to create opportunities within our development code that encourage housing variety and affordability. We're looking at everything we can do to assist property owners, developers, builders, and neighborhoods to encourage a variety of housing at a variety of price points to support Houstonians' needs.
- This is not a planning committee. This is an action committee. We're implementing existing City plans' action items. Our team has identified all these action items and have given you your charge based on what the Houston community has already planned.
- We also recognize that not all recommended code changes are appropriate everywhere. For example, reducing minimum parking requirements would not be appropriate where there isn't sufficient transit. Instead, we're focusing these changes on areas where there is sufficient transit.
- The small lot development recommendations that we talk about today may not be appropriate for your neighborhood or the neighborhoods that you build in, but they are appropriate in some neighborhoods.
- Houston needs more context sensitive options for housing, transit, and parking. That's what this Committee is about.

Meeting Agenda: Suvidha Bandi introduced the agenda items for the rest of the meeting.

- Preliminary ideas for small lot developments
- Overall approach on parking
- Homework activity and next meeting
- Public comments

Preliminary Ideas for Small Lot Developments:

Suvidha Bandi: Previously, we discussed allowing multiple units on unrestricted lots, secondary dwelling unit size and parking requirements, and narrow front-loading lots. Today we want to discuss small lot developments—also known as cottage court style developments—where units are located around an amenity. We want to get your feedback and thoughts on these preliminary ideas, particularly related to feasibility.

Colin Scarff: Small lot developments would be an additional option for small lot single-family. They provide better development outcomes that are more walkable, more pedestrian-friendly, and fit better within existing neighborhoods. Small lot single-family developments:

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- Are infill focused;
 - Include fee-simple ownership;
 - Provide a variety of lot and unit sizes;
 - Are organized around a shared amenity/open space;
 - Focus more on the public realm with buildings that address streets/open spaces than on cars;
 - Could include parking with shared access, that's separated from the lot and located to the side or rear; and
 - Include buildings that are more compatible with the existing neighborhood.

Max Pastore: Preliminary modeling on typical 100'x100' and 100'x150' sites. **Graphics highlighting site plans and initial calculations for mid-block and corner sites with and without existing alleys.** See recording.

Preliminary modeling assumptions:

- Smaller lot sizes (700 SF)
- Smaller unit sizes (1400 SF)
- Lots organized around shared green spaces and include small rear private green spaces
- Attached or semi-detached buildings
- Buildings front a street, common green, or both and include active or semi-active facades
- 1 on-site parking space per lot consolidated to the rear or side, and detached from individual lots

Preliminary modeling findings:

- Sites with alleys deliver more lots and higher densities
- Sites with alleys typically provide more space for contiguous shared open space
- Corner sites result in more active or semi active building facades because of additional street frontage

Colin Scarff: The developments tested with the preliminary modeling couldn't be built today because of current development requirements that require more parking spaces; attached parking only; lot frontage on streets or shared driveways/PAEs only; and more compensating open space per lot. **Graphics highlighting current development requirements.** See recording.

Potential small lot development incentives. **Graphics highlighting a list of potential incentives illustrated by site plan diagrams.** See Recording:

- No minimum lot size
- Flexible lot frontage
- No limit on density
- Reduced required on-site parking
- Detached consolidated parking

Potential small lot development performance standards. **Graphics highlighting a list of potential performance standards illustrated by site plan diagrams.** See Recording:

- Required green space
- Street-fronting buildings
- Active building facades

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- Building height limits

Preliminary Ideas for Small Lot Developments Questions? Comments?:

Zion Escobar: Could you confirm that the models that Max and Colin showed meet the current detention requirements too?

Suvidha Bandi: That's a good question. Once we consolidate ideas and get your thoughts, we'll talk to Public Works to make sure that they're meeting the detention requirements. Based on how much green space is provided, the stormwater could be within these green spaces. It's likely that we could meet the requirements, but we haven't confirmed.

Neal Dikeman: Could one of the Commissioners who's done more townhouse style developments comment on the detention requirement? It seems like we're doing something like this now, but all the green space becomes a lake. Is there a way around that? Are we talking about 700 SF lots or structures?

Colin Scarff: We're showing 700 SF lots. The unit size would depend on the number of stories. You can assume they're 1400 SF units.

Neal Dikeman: So, the proposal in this design is to move the parking out from under the structure but still leave the parking on the developer's land? How would that make sense for development as opposed to leaving it under the structure? You've either got to put structures over the parking or put the parking over the drainage or on the street. Otherwise, it's not economically viable—especially with such small unit sizes.

Margaret Wallace Brown: Let's step back for a moment. These models are really focused on smaller units for families that don't want 3000 SF homes. The idea is that smaller units would also require fewer parking spaces. By taking the parking out of the structure, this brings the scale down and provides better streetscape that is more compatible with existing neighborhoods. We're looking at a development model—cottage courts or pocket neighborhoods—that many cities are following. We understand that people looking for 3000 SF homes with 2 parking spaces are not going to want these. These could be incredibly viable in some neighborhoods where people don't need that much space or parking.

Neal Dikeman: That makes sense. The concept you're describing has efficacy. I'm just trying to understand the envelope that would make it work. It seems like it would be easiest to have the parking in the front to avoid adding the driveway or you could add rentable apartments above the parking. Something that has more density than what's described here.

Mike Dishberger: Interesting idea. I'm all for new ways to build as options. I think you need to get your measurements right—detention is the overriding factor for all of this. You must be at 65% or less on your concrete. If exceeded, you're required to do underground detention. With open ditch streets, this requires pumps. A pump costs \$35,000. Also, Public Works requires the driveway in-turns to be 4' off the property line which would clip the first house next to the driveway in the 100'x150' mid-block no alley model option. You also need to have enough back out space for parking. Also, 100'x150' sites are rare in Houston. Until the alley issues

are resolved, it eliminates more alley development options. We need a solution from Public Works on alleys. I do like options. This could work in some parts of town on cheaper land.

Peter Freedman: I think these are some great ideas here. Related to Public Works, if you're doing fee-simple lots, you'll have to have utilities cross lots through private easements. The private easement process is tough. I would recommend a way to have automatic approvals for private easements going across a property to reach those other infrastructure needs. If not, it'll be very difficult and time consuming to build these out.

Curtis Davis: As we document the challenges to achieve these higher densities, it would be useful to highlight the barriers—in a future presentation—and note how those barriers will be addressed. While many of these challenges and barriers are beyond the Planning Department's control, Planning can set an agenda to get them prioritized and addressed where within the City's purview. These ideas are all great, but we need to address the barriers too.

Kathy Payton: The homework activity helped to show how the lived experience of development is a lot different than what we see on paper. As we begin to see neighborhoods transition with higher densities, it does make a significant difference. I'll be interested to hear the feedback on how this further influences our decisions and recommendations.

Suvidha Bandi: These are all great points. We did keep the 65% coverage in mind related to detention. Related to parking, having parking separated from units is an option. If someone decides to have parking underneath structures, that's also an option. We just wanted to show what other places are doing and how the feasibility may work.

Colin Scarff: We'll look at the drainage calculations for these site plan scenarios.

Sonny Garza: Committee members, we've talked about barriers. We want to make sure this type of infill housing can be built by for-profit developers—not just by nonprofit developers. Do the incentives presented here work?

Yuhayna Mahmud: Are there any minimum standards for compensating open space that we're asking for? Would it be following the compensating open space standards in the Ordinance?

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, it'll be similar to the compensating open space standards. What we've learned by talking to other developers is that the current compensating open space requirement is too high. When the requirement is being met, it's typically in the form of less usable landscape strips. This concept tries to front lots along a contiguous shared green.

Yuhayna Mahmud: I like getting usable compensating open space rather than the typical unusable little strips that we see in the plats. I'm not sure what the size should be, but I agree with the approach of putting the open space together.

Suvidha Bandi: 240 SF per lot is what the Ordinance says today. We haven't arrived at a new number yet and would like your input.

Richard Smith: By the way, the City will work to remove the fences in alleys when an alley is planned to be developed.

Suvidha Bandi: Thanks for that point, Richard. We are working closely with Public Works about alleys. Our goal is to come to a resolution for existing alleys. It'd be very beneficial to have developments use existing alleys over streets for both the City and property owners.

Sonny Garza: Mike, you had a statement about the driveways and a 4' setback?

Mike Dishberger: You need a 4' in-turn that starts 4' off the property line. All of Public Works' standards are in the IDM. The next Public Works director could wipe that all without going to Council. It'd be great if these kinds of things could be put within the ordinance rather than in a design manual.

Suvidha Bandi: The point is noted about the curb cuts. Yes, the curb radius needs to be within the site. We're working with Public Works on the IDM changes that you just mentioned. Yes, we need a provision within Chapter 42 if we want to make these designs happen.

Sonny Garza: Someone else brought up something about private utility easements?

Suvidha Bandi: The crossing of utility easements was the point that was brought up. It's an issue with crossing lot lines. We need to discuss this with Public Works during our TAG meeting.

Neal Dikeman: I didn't bring that point up, but the point is underappreciated. We've run into this issue on remodel projects with CenterPoint and with the City. If you're trying to do real density on an imperfect lot, you've got issues because you have to run power across them. If you need to add easements, it can make a project fairly onerous, especially if the site is small. It's a death by 1000 cuts. Density in the '20s and '30s was delivered because they didn't deal with setbacks, parking, detention, etc...

Mike Dishberger: I like the presentation today because we're talking about incentives and how to get stuff done as opposed to the last meeting which was more about how can we get developers to stop doing something. Related to the open space, the current number is way too high. I suggest 150SF common area per home. The L-shaped driveway concept shown is a massive detention problem. The concrete for the driveway alone is almost 35% paved. This is a particular problem when considering the new undergrounding detention requirements. Ideas are great. Planning, if you were in charge of Public Works, this would be a breeze. We will do these projects if it makes practical sense.

Yuhayna Mahmud: I wanted to comment on the idea of having a maximum lot size. I think this would be a good idea to explore in terms of affordable housing. I'm not sure what the development community thinks the market will do if lot averaging versus max sizes are used. We've identified for several years now that affordable housing

is a need. It's worth looking into. Also, how does the reduction of parking work? What is the adjacency in terms of transit, or are we just talking about a blanket parking reduction?

Sonny Garza: We're looking at a blanket reduction of parking in terms of 1 parking space per unit. That would change based on the distance to a transit center. Suvidha, do you want to answer that question?

Suvidha Bandi: In terms of proximity, we're talking about a ½ mile distance from transit and a ¼ mile from high comfort bike paths.

Yuhayna Mahmud: I feel like that's almost backwards. People are typically willing to bike further than they are willing to walk. Your catchment area for walking would normally be a ¼ mile, while it would be closer to 3 miles for biking. You might want to reconsider your distances with that context.

Suvidha Bandi: What if it was just a ½ mile for both?

Yuhayna Mahmud: For transit, you just need to understand if people are willing to walk. It would be ¼- ½ mile radius in a place that is walkable with sidewalks, etc. Unfortunately, a lot of our city doesn't have walkable sidewalks or sidewalks at all. But, yes Suvidha, that is something I would consider.

Matthew Camp: I appreciate all the comments from the builders and developers, but I don't want to get so hung up on the barriers. Colin has shown real-world built examples of this type of development in other places. Let's focus on how we can get this done—focusing on action and positivity.

Sonny Garza: Our job is to find out what the development barriers are and try to mitigate them. I love the idea of mixing up the size and cost of units to create more workforce housing. For the houses that front streets, could they be larger with individual parking? Maybe have a driveway between them and keep the common space fronted by smaller homes that are tucked further back? The larger units would provide more amenities and subsidize the smaller homes. Permutations of this would allow a developer to balance out profit margins.

Richard Smith: I wanted to speak about Mr. Dishberger's comment about above ground detention requirements—specifically that above ground detention is not allowed anymore. I'm not sure where that's coming from. My understanding is that it's still allowed. Maybe there's a misunderstanding on my part.

Mike Dishberger: Richard, it's in Chapter 9—anything under an acre can no longer have above ground stormwater detention.

Richard Smith: Ok. I've got a couple more comments. Related to alleys, Public Works is doing an intensive study on the alleys for multiple reasons. If an alley was platted, we do allow the use of alleys. If it's just fenced off, we'll work with developers to get those fences removed. The only thing that we require is that you come in and submit plans to develop the alley prior to us getting involved in that. That's partly to keep us out of neighbor fights. If a developer is willing to build out a portion of the alley for use, we will go out and help them red tag and have the fences removed. We ask that developers talk to property owners first. If the property owner won't

remove the fence, we'll red tag it and start working with them to get those fences removed. It gets more troublesome when people have built things within the alley. If movable, we've had people move them. If it's something that's been there for 40-50 years, it's been a much more difficult issue for us to deal with. It'll probably be another year before we're done with our study. We're also looking at doing an assessment of all existing alleys which is part of why it's taking so long.

Jeffrey Kaplan: We're beginning to structure carsharing as a service in some projects that we're working on right now. There's a development example in Austin that provides carsharing on-site in exchange for a parking reduction. This would be beyond relying on Zipcar which only serves Downtown and corporate campuses. We're looking at incorporating it right now in Houston into some urban village development in the East End. On average, a person's car is only in use 5% of the time. That's a ton of time when a car is not being used.

Suvidha Bandi: That's a great idea. One of the topics that's not shown in our slides is about why parking must be on-site rather than off-site. Let's go back to the question slide to make sure we covered everything. What about building height? What is a good height for these kinds of units?

Colin Scarff: Just the number of stories is important to think about. 2.5 to 3 stories maybe? 4 stories is probably too much.

Sonny Garza: If the whole first floor is housing—not a garage—maybe let's go with no more than 2 or 2.5 stories. If we did average unit sizing, we could maybe do 3 to 4 stories in the front, and do 2 to 2.5 stories in the back for smaller units? It just seems to me that the shorter they are, the more affordable they'll be.

Mike Dishberger: People want first floor living. Assuming first floor living, 2 stories should be fine—maybe 2.5 stories maximum. 3 stories might be too much. People don't really want 4 stories anymore—too many flights of stairs.

Neal Dikeman: Units that are sized 1200 SF or less work well if they're well designed. You could probably do that within a 15'x40' or 15'x50' footprint with no more than 2 floors. The biggest challenge is less about height and more about parking locations and setbacks. As soon as I try to add a driveway, I can't stuff in enough units. I've got a sketch that I will send to Suvidha.

Matthew Camp: If you're going to regulate height, measure it in stories—not in feet. This might get you a little more roofline variety. This should also be contextual. If you're next to a 40' tall building, 2 stories would be out of scale.

Jeffrey Kaplan: For one of our Houston co-housing communities, we're exploring raising the yard to allow for the first floor to be a shared amenity like a kitchen. Having a shared amenity on the ground floor makes sense. The goal for this type of development is to maximize the amount of open space—particularly shared open space.

Overall Approach on Parking:

Suvidha Bandi: The goal of the Livable Places Action Committee is to create opportunities within our development standards that encourage housing variety and affordability. Providing parking has a big impact on housing variety and affordability.

Changes to parking requirements will implement actions already recommended in other City plans:

- Plan Houston—Connect people and places
- Resilient Houston—End one-size-fits-all parking requirements
- Climate Action Plan—Reduce parking requirements

Houston has made significant investments in:

- Bike Plan
- Bayou Greenways
- METRO Next Moving Forward Plan (Rail, BRT, BOOST)
- Houston B Cycle

Houston has reduced parking rules through:

- Walkable Places
- Transit Oriented Development (TOD)
- Market based parking

Livable Places parking approach:

- Reduced parking requirements for smaller units
- Eliminating parking minimums in proximity to transit served areas

Livable Places parking approach benefits:

- Increased transit ridership
- Opportunities to use other modes
- More variety in housing options
- Smaller units encouraged
- Reduced housing costs
- Improved storm drainage
- Safer streets

Overall Approach on Parking Questions? Comments?:

Sonny Garza: We're not getting rid of parking, we're just giving more options to developers than they have today. Does anyone have any questions, comments, or ideas that they'd like to share?

Curtis Davis: Whenever the conversation about parking comes up, inevitably folks will bring out their personal horror stories. Even if those lived experiences aren't the rule, they are for the people experiencing them. In terms of having a dialogue, particularly with neighborhood groups, I think it's not just about educating. It's about measuring impacts. For example, "in this community, that was not the rule. Here's a project that was

done and here are the outcomes, etc.” I’m not sure we’re doing enough to think creatively about how to address current parking anxieties and fears.

Sandy Stevens: I am one of those neighbors with fears about what market-based parking will mean for our neighborhood. I live in District D, and our councilmember refers to this district as a “district of destinations.” We are a district of destinations. Events happen that impact the residential area of our neighborhood to such an extent that residents can’t access any on-street parking. It’s all taken by visitors to the area. To let go of any type of parking requirements will make our neighborhood develop in such a way that on-street parking will be impossible for residents. I don’t know how to carve out that issue that this neighborhood faces, but I’m just reporting on the lived experience of this neighborhood.

Homework:

Lynn Henson: Visit Letstalkhouston.org/livable-places to:

- Read Opticos Design’s cottage court missing middle housing type description
- Complete site visit and survey

Homework Questions? Comments?:

Mike Dishberger: I have a comment about the survey. I can only do the survey for 1 site. I’m not allowed to submit another survey for any of the other sites. Is that a flaw or do I just need to do something else?

Lynn Henson: We’ll look at the survey to make sure that you can submit more than 1. In meantime, you can email your comments to me or Suvridha.

Next Meeting: May 3rd

Public Comment:

George Frey: I really like that you have specific suggestions that are quantitative and can be targeted. For each of these targets, can we try to associate those with a specific goal? Along with that goal, there are certain issues with implementing. Let’s identify the risks of those actions and create mitigation plans. In creating a mitigation plan, let’s also identify areas where actions conflict across different agencies or departments. We need more community engagement. There’s no one else from the community who’s able to actively attend these meetings. I’d like to get a better idea of what the City is trying to tackle as part of this program. Is it just related to single family homes and maximizing profits? Please also think about the long-term City budget. Things that we do today will cost a lot more in the future. We spoke a lot about removing things like green space or storm water detention today. If you’re trying to remove the livable aspects of a community, really rethink what you’re trying to do.

Sonny Garza: We’re not trying to remove green space or stormwater detention. If you have specific questions, you can send them to Suvridha, and we’ll get back with you.

Ryan Johnson: I live inside the 610 Loop near West Alabama St and Vossdale Rd. My neighborhood is filled with a lot of ranch style houses, newer single-family homes, and narrow townhomes with their own driveways. Our

streets are typically free of cars which allows us to walk safely through the neighborhood. However, at the end of my subdivision, there's another subdivision that has shared driveway townhomes. There are 3 or 4 of these projects down there. At the end of our subdivision, there are cars parked on both sides of our street at all hours. These are not guests but residents overflowing into on-street parking. Neighbors have to dance around each other to go to work. The street isn't wide enough to allow 2 cars to safely pass with the street filled with cars. It's unsafe for cyclists and people walking their dogs. Even though my house is up the block, cars from these shared driveway projects overflow up to my house. It especially causes issues on trash days. Also, I'm worried about the separated parking shown in some of the development scenarios. Because of recent crime events in my neighborhood, people like my wife don't feel safe walking from their cars to their homes.

Brooke Wimmer: I also wanted to touch on the street parking problems with shared driveway communities. I live in one and am surrounded by many others. I've noticed that a lot of investors or homeowners buy these houses and then rent them out. A lot of those houses have 3-4 bedrooms with roommates. A lot of these houses have 3+ cars with only a 2-car garage. That forces residents to park out on the street or outside the gate. With the terrible lighting and homeless people on the side of the road, it's scary for our residents to leave the community to go outside the gates to get to their car. A lot of people in our community are scared to go to their cars at night. It also just gets really congested. Many of the driveways also get blocked by delivery vehicles. I also notice that many of these shared driveway communities aren't well maintained—particularly outside their gates along the street. It's a real eyesore.

Lynn Henson: I just wanted to let everyone know that the Livable Places survey has been changed so that individuals can log as many comments as they like once they log in.

David Cox: I'm an architectural designer at Design DCA that does a lot of this type of product—townhomes, patio homes, high-end single-family homes, etc. A lot of my concerns were alleviated today by hearing that this is geared towards more of an incentive-based program versus forced requirements. This is certainly not a 1 size fits all solution. The idea of providing shared parking flies in the face of the car community that we're unfortunately in. I hope that this remains an incentive-based program only.

Ken Boyesen: I build homes in the Houston Downtown area. Related to affordability and timing, these shared driveway projects require a lot of extra engineering. There's less engineering required for the frontloaded development option. With the shared driveways, there's tremendous permitting delays for these. Please take these things into account. At a minimum, speeding up the permitting time would be an incentive for shared driveway projects.

Eric Hymowitz: I'd like to point out that the 7 zip codes that were listed in the survey all have high rates of vehicle theft and damage according to the Houston Police's NIBRS reporting. Between January and February combined, there were 826 reports of vehicle theft or vandalism on the streets. I just wanted to point that out in addition to all the other comments that were made.

Sonny Garza: When we've been talking about shared driveways, a lot of what we're trying to do is preserve parking on the street. Sometimes we come up with an idea that has unintended consequences. That's why we

have so many people in this meeting to give us different perspectives. Some of us are looking at this on paper while others are living it every day. We appreciate your comments. I'd like to assure you that you're being listened to by the City.

Steven Garza: I've been a Houston resident for over 20 years. The other weekend, I tried to take the family and kids to Hermann Park. After nearly 30 minutes of driving around, we ended up parking nearly a mile from the park. Street parking was limited in the neighborhood, which seemed to be filled with shared driveway developments. The street parking is all full and the streets are so narrow that it makes the egress in and out of the neighborhoods challenging.

Meeting adjourned at 4:59 p.m.