

LEARNING FROM DENVER

More insights from the Congress for the New Urbanism

BY KATHERINE GREGOR

Denver was the host city for CNU 17, this year's Congress for the New Urbanism national conference (see "Compact, Climate-Friendly, Competitive," June 26). And it's a good city to take lessons from, as it's further ahead on tackling the same urban-planning issues we struggle with in Austin. Touring the city and the region, the assembled New Urbanists heard how Denver voters have enthusiastically funded and built the projects that Austin endlessly discusses. We saw a big, vibrant, walkable downtown; intact older neighborhoods with great architectural character; a central-city light rail system with six lines; and a whole region intelligently shifting to more sustainable lifestyles. What has Denver gotten right? Adept planning, linked to new code, linked to new transit.

DEVELOPING
stories

BLUEPRINT DENVER: NIMBY LOVE

After completing its **Comprehensive Plan 2000**, Denver citizens felt the need to address pressing growth issues in more detail. So the city set to work on **Blueprint Denver**, the city's first integrated land-use and transportation plan, adopted in 2002. It aims to enhance the city's quality of life by "using land in a way that is healthy for its economy, supports alternative modes of transportation, and maintains the integrity of neighborhoods."

Denver's Comprehensive Plan 2000 had predicted a 20-year gain of 132,000 residents in the city proper, with the metro area receiving another 760,000. The plan process highlighted the need "to be more rigorous in locating people where they have more choices than the automobile to get around," noted an article co-authored by Jennifer Moulton and Bill Hornby. The result of "a great number of impassioned neighborhood discussions," Blueprint Denver recommended a fully integrated approach to transportation and land-use improvements. "It offers the heretical thought that some of the new population growth be directed toward specifically identified areas of change, where economic and mobility needs could be satisfied and welcomed," said Moulton and Hornby. "It also suggests we restrain unbridled growth from areas of stability, primarily residential neighborhoods."

Here's the takeaway organizing principle: Blueprint Denver identified and classified each part of the city as either an "area of stability" or an "area of change." This reassured the neighborhood NIMBYs: Those living in an area of stability saw that Blueprint Denver sought to protect the character and desired traits of their established central neighborhoods. (Even those hoods, however, are expected to accommodate some new development and redevelopment.) At the same time, citizens downtown and in distressed or undeveloped areas saw the city actively planning how to fix their problems – while striving not to displace them. Areas of

change were recommended for the New Urbanist treatment: well-planned, walkable and bikeable, mixed-use, street-networked, transit-oriented dense new development.

Interestingly, Blueprint Denver was led by consultant **Calthorpe Associates**. CNU leading light **Peter Calthorpe** has consulted locally on **Envision Central Texas** and Capital Metro's "**All Systems Go!**" long-range transit 2030 plan, among other projects. But Capital Metro's plan was commissioned by the transit agency, which unlike a city has no land-use authority; it had no actual power to shift development patterns. To make up for lost time, the Austin City Council and management now need to ensure that comprehensive planning consultant WRT delivers (within the city's new comprehensive plan) a detailed, fully integrated land-use and transportation plan, like Blueprint Denver. That plan will need a corresponding land-use code, to give it teeth and the force of law. (It also is bound to need a real rail transit system, funded and built ASAP) Problem: WRT's scope of services includes a diagnosis of the current land-development code's ills but not an actual rewrite or creation of a new code.

'THE NEW CODE' - BETTER THAN BAND-AIDS

Once Blueprint Denver was in place, the city embarked on a wholesale revision of its land-use code, to match the law to the vision. Like the plan, the code wisely pairs twin goals of protection and growth. To engage the public, the city created the appealing, informative website www.newcodedenver.org, which admits the old was a mess: "The current Denver Zoning Code is a messy patchwork of 52 years of revisions and Band-Aids." (Austin's code is held together with sticking plaster, too.) It champions the benefits of a rewrite: "[T]he New Code will ensure that our city's growth fits our collective visions, desires and needs" as it "incorporates ways to make our city more sustainable and affordable, ensuring the value of its land as predicted growth occurs." Finally, "The New Code will be easier to read, and the logic behind its regulations and procedures more transparent."

At a recent meeting of CNU's Central Texas Chapter, Austinites were already calling for a similar reform of our zoning code, as part of the comprehensive plan. New Urbanists favor abandoning a use-based code (what we have now) for a form-based code – better understood by most folks as a context-based code. (The **Downtown Austin Alliance** is currently organizing a symposium to help Austinites understand form-based code and why so many cities are switching to it.) Denver's mantra: "It's all about context." In a nutshell, the new code says that buildings (and their forms, e.g., shape and height) must be

New Urbanism Comes to East Riverside

At a public meeting last Thursday, June 25, a rigorous New Urbanist vision was unveiled for the East Riverside Corridor. Comparable to some of the best plans and projects seen at CNU 17 in Denver, the draft master plan hinges on the premise that rail transit will run down Riverside Drive, between I-35 and Ben White, and on out to the airport. Leveraging the transformational powers of transit-oriented development, the corridor plan shows East Riverside losing its car focus (e.g., a blur of parking lots and strip shopping centers) in favor of a people focus (attractive places to walk, recreate, eat, shop, and live). Handsome three-story architecture surrounds transit stops; East Riverside itself features bike lanes, frequent bus service, street trees, shade features, improved pedestrian crossings, landscaped sidewalks, new parks, and creek-front green space and trails.

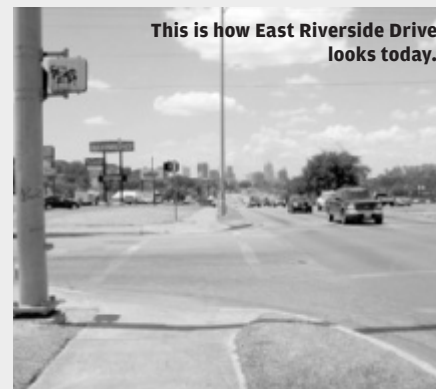


Consultant A. Nelesen Associates Inc. used a visual preferences study – in which Austinites picked photos of good-looking places they liked – to document a strong citizen desire for a New Urbanist redo. Now, how to ensure that the promising plan doesn't remain a pie-in-the-sky vision? The consultant recommends rezoning the area; city planning staff hope to complete that in about a year. (As an immediate fix, City Council will vote soon on rezoning the eastern stretch of East Riverside, making the entire frontage a core transit corridor – which kicks in commercial design standards.) As in Denver's new zoning, the new zoning code would designate six land-use districts, each with context-based and form-based rules. Neighborhood streets wouldn't be allowed any more height, but transit-oriented development would allow commercial districts to rise five to six stories, with optional density bonuses.

Council also will need to provide a funding mechanism, such as tax-increment financing, for the crucial streetscape improvements, pocket parks, and other public investments. And, oh, don't forget that city of Austin rail line! Mayor Lee Leffingwell campaigned on the promise of a transportation bond election next year; he hopes it will fund Austin's long-discussed rail-transit system. If the Riverside segment wins voter approval (even as a future phase), transit-oriented development promises to leave the station years before the actual train.

– K.G.

To review the draft master plan (which goes to council in September) and to comment online, visit www.eastriversidecorridor.com.



This is how East Riverside Drive looks today.



This is how it could look under the East Riverside Corridor Plan.

COURTESY OF CITY OF AUSTIN

designed to fit gracefully into the surrounding neighborhood or district.

Denver's new zoning will require buildings to fit within one of six different "contexts" derived from "the existing and desirable characteristics of Denver's diverse neighborhoods." The choices: suburban, urban edge, urban, general urban, urban center, and downtown. (They also threw in "special contexts.") While Blueprint Denver provided the vision and initial strategy, a community-based Zoning Code Task Force has been working on the effort since 2005. After years in the oven, a draft of the new code finally is out for public review before going to City Council for adoption (see the rezoning map at www.newcodedenver.org).

RAIL TRANSIT: MAKING FASTRACKS

Blueprint Denver also led to a successful November 2004 rail referendum, supported by the business community, in which voters strongly approved **FasTracks** – a \$4.7 billion

transit system to be built out over 12 years, funded with a 0.4-cent sales-tax increase. The system will add 122 miles of new urban and regional rail service and new bus routes in the metro area.

Since that vote, projected project costs have swelled to \$7.9 billion, while the transit agency's sales-tax revenues sunk with the recession (like Capital Metro's), leading to a \$2 billion shortfall. Yet rather than cut elements or extend construction timelines, a January survey showed that most Denver voters preferred to double the tax increase to get the system done on schedule – because they believed in it so much. What was most fascinating to see in Denver – and in historic towns such as Golden and Arvada on the planned new lines – were the handsome new public spaces and transit-oriented projects that are already open and bustling, even though the new rail stations won't open for years. If you build it (or just vote to fund it), New Urbanists will come.