

The Density Debate: *Mass Transit and Zoning*

by Lorraine Atherton and Jeff Jack

The density debate that Matt Moore referred to in the April ZNews is at the heart of Austin's neighborhood planning process. As each neighborhood has worked its way through the planning process, there has been considerable pressure by some New Urbanist advocates to change existing zoning to allow for added density in our older neighborhoods (up-zoning). As the Zilker neighborhood prepares to enter into the city's neighborhood planning process early next year, it is important to discuss this critical issue openly and evaluate how it will change our city and Zilker. Matt certainly makes a good point that individual neighborhoods need to keep in mind citywide issues as they plan for their own areas. Likewise it is the responsibility of the City to develop neighborhood plans that respect the quality of life that has attracted residents to our neighborhoods. In short, a truly responsible plan balances the preservation of the character of our neighborhood with the demands of a growing city.

Some advocates for increasing the density in our core neighborhoods suggest that added density offers various benefits. These range from promoting mass transit to preventing sprawl. So this time let's look at some facts and myths of the density debate with regard to transit and zoning.

Density and Mass Transit

Many Central Texans regard traffic congestion as one of the worst problems Austin faces. One theme often repeated in support of added density is that it will make public transit possible and therefore take cars off the road. Let's look at what the optimum population density to support public transit might be.

First we need to identify what we mean by public transit. If we leap immediately to images of subways and elevated commuter trains along every major corridor, then we may well need the density of a Manhattan to pay for such a scheme. If we look instead at providing an alternative to the car for our current neighborhood residents, it is a far different story. We can focus on a convenient, efficient bus system that matches our needs

and budget right now. So what is the density needed to support a neighborhood-friendly public transit system? Is doubling our population by up-zoning Zilker the only way to get good public transit?

CAMPO, which is responsible for transportation planning in Travis, Hays, and Williamson counties, recently cited a study by the Brookings Institution that indicated that "public transit works best" at a density of 4,200 or more people per square mile. That sounds like a lot of folks, but it really works out to only 6.5 people per acre (ppa). How does this compare to Austin? It turns out that all of Central Austin averages about 7 ppa. This reinforces what Capital Metro confirmed during the 2002 debate over light rail: our current core-area neighborhoods are already dense enough to support a viable public transit system.

What about Zilker? It may come as a surprise to some, but the current density for our entire area, including all the commercial and nonresidential acreage, is about 8 ppa (almost 5,000 people per square mile). Within ZNA's boundaries, the density varies from 5 ppa in the area between Barton Springs Road and Town Lake (mainly parkland, commercial, restaurants, and trailer parks) to over 15 ppa in the area between La Casa and Barton Skyway (mostly fourplexes and apartments). Taken alone, our residential areas have a density of about 16 ppa, over twice the density noted in the Brookings report. So if you're waiting for redevelopment to bring South Austin's population density up to a level that will support public transit, wait no longer. We're already there, and it's time to look at removing other impediments to better transit (rather than focusing on adding density) as we develop our neighborhood plan.

Density and Zoning

Another myth heard in density discussions is that the current zoning excludes additional people from our neighborhood and that single-family zoning in particular prohibits increased density. This is often cited as the reason for adopting small-lot options (replacing the standard SF-3 lots of 5,750 sf with lots of 3,500 sf to 2,500 sf) as part of our neighborhood planning process. What's missing in these discussions is an understanding

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of our current residential zoning and the densities it really can accommodate.

Although we know Zilker already has a relatively high population per acre, we need to calculate another important measure of density: the number of persons per housing unit (persons/hu). Fortunately, the 2000 Census has done that for us. Our current persons/hu is low compared with the city as a whole. The citywide average is about 2.5 persons/hu; Zilker's is only 1.8 persons/hu. That means the existing housing stock can accommodate many more people than it does now, with no changes to our existing zoning and without building out the current zoning to its full capacity.

To see what fully utilizing our existing housing stock would mean with regard to density, consider one side of a typical block in the southern part of the neighborhood (about an acre's worth of SF-3 zoning). It has 8 lots, each with a detached single-family house. Two of the lots have a garage apartment or granny flat, for a total of 10 housing units. At the average Zilker utilization of 1.8

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persons/hu, the block will have 18 residents. If these same houses were occupied at the citywide rate of 2.5 persons/hu, the population would be 25 people, an increase of 38% in density just with changes in occupancy of our existing housing stock. If this happened across the entire neighborhood, we would see a population increase from close to 6,000 to 8,200. This would bring our density up from 8 ppa to 11 ppa, almost double the minimum density in the Brookings report.

Neighborhoods have their own life cycles and change over time as people move on, have children, or take on additional housemates. Right now Zilker seems to have a high proportion of single-occupancy homes where urban professionals and older folks live alone. Imagine what could happen as young families move into the area and our persons/hu increases up to full utilization of our existing housing stock. We could see our occupancy rate increase up to 3.5 persons/hu (a two-parent family with one or two children). In that case, our population could mushroom to 11,500, a 94% increase, resulting in a density of more than 15 ppa over the entire neighborhood and 31 ppa on our residential acreage. That high utilization rate for existing housing stock may or may not happen over the next 20 years, but significant additional density is certainly possible with no zoning changes at all.

Those numbers do not begin to measure the density that would be added if all of the existing zoning capacity were fully built out. We do not know what density would be possible if every lot large enough for a duplex had a duplex, if every one- or two-bedroom house were remodeled to maximize the building area with five bedrooms, or if a garage apartment or granny flat were added to every single-family lot that would allow it. Even the land already zoned multifamily in our neighborhood is not fully built out. Although we don't have those numbers, it is clear that our existing zoning has a great deal of unused capacity. The current zoning really does not prohibit the opportunity for significant additional density in Zilker.

In October we will continue this examination of density and address the myths of dense-packing our neighborhoods as the only alternative to sprawl and the density required for a walkable community.

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