



Meeting Notes

December 14, 2021

Call to Order

Recording started by Truscenia Garrett.

Sonny Garza, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 3:01 p.m.

Welcome by Co-Chairs

Mr. Sonny Garza, Co-Chair took the roll and presented the speaker rules. 14 committee members were present during roll call. There were 60 participants.

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

- Ron Lindsey is moving from Houston and has asked to step down from this Committee
- Thank you to the Public Works Department for being so involved with this effort and for joining this meeting

Suvidha Bandi: Today's discussion points are:

- Committee meeting dates for 2022
- Recap of this year's meeting topics
- Future growth and actions
- Challenges with current lot standards
- Homework activity and next meeting
- Public comments

Future Committee meeting dates:

- January 11th
- February 8th
- March 8th
- April 5th
- May 3rd
- June 7th
- July 12th
- August 9th
- September 6th
- October 4th
- November 15th
- December 20th

During our previous meetings, we discussed:

- Allowing multiple units on unrestricted lots
- ADU size
- Developments with shared access

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- Reduced parking

The purpose of today's meeting is to discuss the development of street facing lots where existing 50' wide lots are subdivided into two 25' lots.

Lynn Henson: The City of Houston is growing (over 2 million residents based on the 2020 census) and is expected to exceed 3 million by 2040. We need to provide diverse housing options for this increased population growth.

The Harris County's Housing Needs Assessment provides information about 10-year housing demand and supply by income bracket. Over 200,000 new households are projected to be formed in the next 10 years across many income brackets. Regional forecasts project that the city will need an additional 120,000 homes by 2030 and an additional 180,000 homes by 2040.

How do we meet this demand? We refer to previous plan goals from:

- Plan Houston: an affordable multimodal transportation network; attractive walkable neighborhoods with diverse housing types; sufficient quality affordable housing options
- Resilient Houston: safe, secure, affordable, accessible homes; denser infill development; integrate ADUs into existing neighborhoods; end one-size fits-all parking regulations; amend lot-site and coverage-area requirements for subdivisions
- Complete Communities: new housing for people of diverse incomes; prevent housing displacement; build affordable single-family infill housing; secure a flood resilient community

Creating Opportunities within our Development Standards that Encourage Housing Variety and Affordability:

Walkable Neighborhoods

Colin Scarff: Organized the walkability conversation into three parts:

- The Challenge
- Why is Walkability Important?
- Deep Dive into Development Options

The challenge of replacing a single family house on a 50' wide lot with more houses on narrower lots:

- Replacement homes often have front driveways which makes the streetscape less safe for pedestrians
- Providing shared driveway development alternatives minimize the negative streetscape impact but can be more costly because of current stormwater detention requirements
- Providing rear alleys also minimize the negative streetscape impact but are expensive and cumbersome to build under current regulations

Walkability has many positive impacts:

- Economics: walkable neighborhoods are strongly linked to well-being; attract talent and creates jobs; and facilitate cheaper transportation options
- Health: physical health benefits; fewer pedestrian fatalities
- Environment: minimizes the heat island effect; better for stormwater management

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- Equity: provides seniors and children with more independence; supports lower-income individuals who might not have access to a car

How walkable is Houston? According to Walkscore.com:

- Houston is still a car-dependent city
- 21st most walkable large city in the country
- Houston is more walkable than San Antonio, Dallas, and Fort Worth
- Some of Houston's most walkable neighborhoods include: Downtown; Fourth Ward; Greater Eastwood; Greater Heights; Greater Third Ward; Greenway – Upper Kirby; Gulfton; Magnolia Park; Midtown; Museum District; Neartown – Montrose; Second Ward; University Place; Washington Avenue – Memorial Park; and Woodlake – Briar Meadow

While Houston does have walkable neighborhoods with amenities worth walking to, it isn't always easy to walk safely. **Graphic examples of existing streetscapes in walkable Houston neighborhoods.** See recording. The elements of safer, more walkable streetscapes include:

- Front doors
- Ground story windows
- Front porches
- Walkways
- Front yards
- Sidewalks
- Tree lawns
- Street trees
- On-street parking

A deep dive into some development options for subdividing existing 50' wide lots. **Graphic examples of development options—each with its own pros and cons.** See recording.

- Option 1: front-loaded
- Option 2: flag lot
- Option 3: shared driveway
- Option 4: rear-loaded
- Option 5: alley-loaded

Suvidha Bandi: Development questions to think about:

- What are the guiding principles of future residential development?
 - Shared or rear access
 - Active ground floors with pedestrian connections to the sidewalk
 - Narrower driveways and less curb cuts
 - Preserve on-street parking
 - Smaller homes with reduced parking
 - Shaded and continuous sidewalks
- How to allow development without losing the pedestrian realm?
 - Rear access, common drive for multiple units
 - Narrower driveways
 - Single car garages

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- What tools will encourage development with shared or rear access?
 - Units fronting on common green space instead of streets or shared driveways
 - Reduced parking
 - Parking separated from units

Walkable Neighborhoods Questions? Comments?:

Sheri Smith: My question goes back to Lynn's presentation. I would like to add another layer to consider. What kind of shortage do we have based on unit size or household size? We need a better idea of what types of houses are needed.

Lynn Henson: Yes, we can look into this.

Luis Guajardo: I was the project manager on this Harris County study. I can speak to Sheri's question. In the growth projections, we didn't get that fine grained because we would have to make too many assumptions to get those numbers. We do have data that suggests that the City's household sizes are shrinking.

Curtis Davis: Can we also look at ownership and tenancy typologies? Housing as a service? Rentals? Condos? Understanding this information would help.

Sonny Garza: We've tied ourselves to front-loaders. We want to make sure that people are willing to build what we've come up with here. We'd love your input.

Curtis Davis: Related to alley developments, some of these are public investments rather than private. Can you give us guidance on the limits of our feedback/work scope?

Mike Dishberger: As far as I know, no one has gotten an alley permit in the past 2.5 years. Builders love alleys. Most existing alleys need to be rebuilt and require expensive drainage improvements. If a builder isn't required to improve the alley to street standards, that would encourage more alley-loaded projects. Also, most front-loaders are two stories, not three. For shared driveways, garage orientation and drainage detention requirements make this model less financially feasible. Detention requirements have changed a lot over the last few years. If your site is under one acre, it's almost impossible to meet the new detention standards. Changing these rules would help. Lots of new rules are preventing builders from developing shared driveways.

Sonny Garza: Curtis, we're interested in feedback on development regulations. We'll be looking for ways to incentivize builders in the ways like Mr. Dishberger mentioned.

Suvidha Bandi: Thanks for the comments. We're working closely with Houston Public Works—especially for drainage, shared driveway, and alley requirements. A reminder to the group—we'd like to understand feedback on subdivision/development regulations.

Megan Sigler: Related to utilities, are the lines big enough to handle this new development? This is mostly a concern related to garden apartments where replats are not necessarily required. Does the developer have to increase capacity if there are less replats (i.e. more than one unit on a lot)?

Suvidha Bandi: We're talking about subdivided lots—in which case, replats would be required. We just want to encourage shared driveways over front-loaders. Utilities would be brought up to standards during the replat. We'll come back in January or February to discuss updates related to multiple units on one lot where no replat is necessary.

Sonny Garza: Megan, this gets back to the different types of multi-family development permitting.

Megan Sigler: Dealing with 50' lots makes developing better development alternatives challenging. Maybe we can get more creative with larger subdivisions.

Brandie Lockett: Has there been any consideration of "house plus" typologies, and their benefits to walkability. What would those typologies look or feel like on a more commercial corridor that's not a primarily residential street?

Suvidha Bandi: Can you explain "house plus"?

Brandie Lockett: House plus is like mixed-use. The primary program of the lot is residential or a house form, but it's about how we hybridize another program with it like live-work. How can the housing typologies support the neighborhoods? Has there been any thought to this?

Suvidha Bandi: I will have to look into this a little bit more. Live-work units are already allowed in Houston. When it comes to permitting there may be some additional requirements that are different than the simple residential use. We can discuss this further together.

Peter Freedman: Wanted to follow up on Megan's comments on utilities. We run into having to decide who's responsible for updating old utilities – this is an extra difficult question when it comes to affordable housing development. When you change the direction of the houses, like to face alleyways, you don't have direct connections to certain utilities, so you have to use easements or other ways. This can be a tough journey for developers, and they try to avoid it. Regarding ADUs, there's a big difference between having a single unit above a garage, compared with three units with three bathrooms. There's a big difference between utility usage – it has more to do with the number of people in each unit and number of facilities in each unit. Also, I'm excited to hear about Public Works' work on shared driveways – I have several lots currently where I have to do front-loaded lots, where I'd love to do alley or shared drive.

Suvidha Bandi: I understand your point about flag lot utility access challenges. I will look into this further.

Sonny Garza: I recently saw in San Francisco that they have lots of street-facing garages along with lots of on-street parking, because they have single-car width garages. Is this single-car or tandem garage doable here?

Kathy Payton: One of the ways we've been able to reduce costs of housing has been through single-car garages. Most families use them more for storage than for cars. This is a challenge because for most of these you extend the length of the driveway so they can fit more than one car on it. It's important to have that storage area because otherwise people start storing stuff in their yards.

Peter Freedman: We also use single-car garages now. The issue is that you have a standard driveway width that you have to meet regardless of if you're serving a single or two-car garage. This is good for allowing more parking on site, but if you're trying to allow more on-street parking, that minimum requirement needs to be changed.

Sonny Garza: What if it was a side-loaded garage on a flag lot, would you still need that extra driveway width?

Peter Freedman: Not at the street.

Suvidha Bandi: Peter, you mentioned there is a required width for the driveway. I think it is 12'-24'. We want to find out if there is a way to not require 24'.

Peter Freedman: 12' is the standard. Just enough room for 2 cars. You could definitely change that around for less impervious cover or use gravel. One great option is to do a common driveway between 2 lots.

Mike Dishberger: Right now, the minimum shared driveway width at the street is 18'. It seems like this is too much.

Colin Scarff: A quick question for the Committee—enclosed garages vs. carports: How marketable is that in the Houston market?

Mike Dishberger: A lot of neighbors are fighting carports. It's not marketable at all.

Peter Freedman: I would agree with Mike in some areas. But in some lower-income areas, carports are used a lot. On infill lots I think carports are a possibility, but I don't know about new-builds. If someone has a choice between no cover and some cover, they'd take the carport over nothing.

Curtis Davis: Under certain lot conditions there may be forms of development that don't fit regulations. Maybe it's efficient to have a more robust exemption review that could be flagged for experiment.

Suvidha Bandi: In some other cities we've noticed that corner and other lots have different requirements from the normal mid-block lots. Are you suggesting that we give opportunities for corner lots to develop in different ways?

Curtis Davis: Yes, but not just corner lots. That was just an example.

Peter Freedman: If there is talk with Public Works about making some of these changes, I just want to say "the sooner the better".

Mike Dishberger: Regarding corner lots— everybody wants a back yard. On corner lots that's difficult to achieve. Maybe there can be an exemption for a smaller setback on corner lots to help.

Megan Sigler: Regarding the one-car garages, I wonder if there's any market research on the success of them? Or any data on how many are being built or permitted now?

Suvidha Bandi: A month or two ago we had a developer showing single-car garages. I discussed with them the marketability and they said there were no challenges. The market is changing and there is room for single-car garages.

Sandy Stevens: I was most interested in this conversation to work with Public Works to enable alleyway access for parking. Many of our alleys are unused. I'm also intrigued by the shared driveways for townhomes. I see firsthand the impact of lots of front-loaded townhomes on the public realm. I love the creative approach that shared driveways offer.

Suvidha Bandi: What if we try separating parking from the units. For example, a shared parking area on a lot that's used by all units. Any comments on this?

Sonny Garza: I would think that this idea is not very popular with developers right now.

Peter Freedman: We've tried it and as long as someone can park close to their home it's okay. So, you either need street parking or parking on the lot. There is a whole new sharing mentality when it comes to younger people and transportation. A project at UH is putting 3 rental cars in the parking lot instead of parking spaces so students don't need to own their own cars. I think the way we think of these things now is changing.

Curtis Davis: There are developers that are looking at service enhancements for primarily the rental market where you have access to a vehicle, including pickup/moving trucks, in the same way you have access to a pool or gym.

Megan Sigler: It's common in other cities to not have parking attached to your unit. We're not quite used to it here in Houston yet, but things are changing.

Mike Dishberger: I also think it's worth looking at the idea of disconnected parking from units.

Suvidha Bandi: And it gives an opportunity for each lot to not require driveway access. We can explore these ideas more.

Luis Guajardo: We have to recognize that the cost of land is increasing so much and there's an inherent tension between how much land we devote to cars versus people and where they can live. We have a big housing crisis and know what we need to prioritize.

Homework:

Lynn Henson: Visit Let's Talk Houston\Livable Places to:

- Read the Harris County Needs Assessment

Luis Guajardo: This assessment is a comprehensive look at supply/demand in different income brackets and really helps us understand the scale of housing challenges here. This report is meant to spotlight the issue with the lack of housing. We've added a section in the document on financing and how to address the financing gap. There's been a lot of community input and there's a lot of data behind it that you can access through the County or Kinder Institute.

Next Meeting: January 11th

Public Comment:

Barbara McGuffey: I would ask for a report from the Committee each month. My neighborhood is concerned about the buffering, and we would appreciate regular updates. Regarding the front-loaders, I live in a complex of 26 townhomes that's very walkable with shared driveways, but the parking is an issue because I have no parking. There's no room to park on shared driveways. Our garage doors face each other. There's no on-site guest parking. Our streets are suitable for on-street parking. I suggest you bring in Maria Irshad of Park Houston to discuss what she knows about parking issues in specifically the mixed-use neighborhoods.

Allison Newport: I ask as a guiding principle to incorporate proactive coordination across city departments to anticipate issues and provide structure for them to be resolved on the front end. For example, if you're close to a corner there shouldn't be any parking allowed within x feet of the corner. These issues shouldn't have to be addressed only after hundreds of 311 requests. Impediments to the right-of-way are common and not clearly addressed in the current code. Better attention needs to be paid to street widths and available rights-of-way. It's important to have continuous sidewalks, protect the visibility triangle, and those sorts of things.

George Frey: I want to know Colin Scarff's opinion on shared drive versus the other options. I'm concerned with pedestrian safety. Also, regarding the basis of the 27 single-family units per acre, I'd like to understand how that number was chosen, because it seems problematic.

Sonny Garza: George, the committee will address your comments at the next meeting.

Mark Williamson: I agree with Barbara and Allison. We need more study on how to deal with increasing number of trash receptacles as density increases. We should also be doing composting. It's going to be a nightmare if 27 homes on a single driveway are putting out three trash cans each week. Regarding alley access issues, I don't want the legitimate drainage concerns to be lost but we need to work out some way that we can feasibly develop less than a substantial portion of a large block.

Gregg Engle: I'd love to know which meeting in the future where you'll speak about the possibility of putting three or four rental units on a single-family lot like mine in the Heights. Within a few blocks of my house, I can walk to complexes that have dozens or hundreds of units. If we could open up the availability of these smaller lots for three- or fourplexes, we could keep the quiet nature of the Heights, instead of tearing them down to put in these new massive apartment structures.

Meeting adjourned at 5:08 p.m.