

Austin Great Public Spaces

Meeting with Council Aides

10/23/09

Who we are: The founders of Austin Great Public Spaces are people who advocate, in different ways, for more attention to the quality of public spaces in Austin. They are members of the Congress for the New Urbanism, Alliance for Public Transportation, Real Community, Austin Parks Foundation and many others.

Why we're here today: To give you a heads up on what we have going on, and get your feedback and ideas.

What is the goal of this group?

This spring, CNU hosted a Great Public Spaces workshop. One of the findings that emerged was the huge number of groups working in different ways on public space issues in Austin – the Families and Children Task Force, Sustainable Neighborhoods Association, Design Commission, to name a few. Broadly speaking, they share key issues including:

- Promoting activities to enliven underutilized or functionally segregated public spaces we already have and to make sure that ones we build do not end up empty and neglected.
- Increasing thoughtful design and accessible implementation of parkland and publicly open spaces (including plazas, courtyards, etc) in redeveloping areas.
- Building more quickly an interconnecting network of sidewalks and bike facilities navigable by children and welcoming to all users.

What are our next steps?

Following upon this event, the GPS group began meeting to explore ways to support each other in pursuing our shared goals. One of our first actions has been to write the “Call for Great Public Spaces,” which we’re asking citizens to sign to show their support for public space investments. By doing this we are also building a network of citizens that can be mobilized in support of key decisions. As we progress, we will come back and ask Council to “sign” this call to demonstrate their support.

Council can act in support of this initiative:

1. By signing a resolution prioritizing decisions that integrate quality of public spaces into public and private development decisions.
2. By ensuring placement of public space advocates in key stakeholder groups such as future bond committees.
3. Others?.....

The questions we come with?

1. What are some other ways that our group can help public space initiatives that council members are working on?
 1. We need to take this issue on in a formal way; what do you think the best format is for doing so?
 2. How can the city use activities, including but not limited to arts and vending, to enliven our public spaces?

A Call for Great Public Spaces

We, the undersigned citizens, declare our commitment to the value, creation and ongoing improvement of great public spaces in Austin. We want, need, and are committed to work toward an interconnected network of well-designed outdoor spaces that are welcoming and well used by all.

Great public spaces are in constant creation. They are created through thoughtful design, then recreated and brought to life daily by the people who use them. We make them great through our art, music, food, games, children, and so much more.

Whether it is publicly or privately owned, a great public space is one that feels like it has no owner – one where every visitor feels invited to participate, enjoy, and become inspired by the space. They are places where we meet as citizens, neighbors, friends and family. They are the cradles of our public identity that define the special essence of Austin.

All parks should be great public spaces. But great public spaces go beyond parks to include plazas, courtyards, bridges, trails, sidewalks, bikeways, and the streets themselves. In a great city, public spaces are not islands. They are the very fabric of the city – a network to be enjoyed by all from oldest to youngest.

We need great public spaces for their own sake. We also need them because they support our community values. They physically connect Austin in ways that encourage us to walk, bike and get outside. They make the city both safe and fun for children and families. They provide wildlife habitat, visibility for our artist and musician communities, and places to buy and sell ice cream and trailer tacos. They underscore our connection to nature and to each other.

Thus, we agree to make great public spaces a priority for planning, design, funding, and development decisions. We call for the same commitment from both the public and private sectors. We offer no specific design manifesto; as with art, our tastes in great public spaces can be broad. We believe in providing enduring spaces flexible enough to evolve over time – just as Congress Avenue, one of Austin’s defining public spaces, has evolved through the eras of the horse, the trolley, the car, and beyond.

We will manifest our commitment through ACTION:

- Seeking out untapped opportunities to create new and renewed public spaces
- Calling for all new development projects to contribute to our great public space network
- Calling for all public expenditures and incentive programs to prioritize the creation of great and sustainable public spaces
- Re-examining existing parks and public spaces, to find and develop their potential
- Contributing our own time to help create, support, maintain, and fundraise for them
- And most importantly, by actively claiming and energizing our city through our performances, food, games, celebrations, and civic expression we enjoy in our growing network of great public spaces.

Now, let’s go out and play.

Principles

What defines a "Great" Public Space?

We call upon the Austin City Council to establish defining principles for great public spaces in Austin — and to test all existing and planned spaces against them. Toward that end, and as an interim measure, we offer the following principles. We call upon city government to help educate and inspire the public, private developers, and city employees about the principles of creating great public spaces.

If it's publicly owned, it needs to be great. By definition, every outdoor place owned by the public or government should be a great public space. Let's become a city known for serving every citizen well with a wonderful fabric of streetscapes, parks, and "outdoor living rooms" around our civic buildings.

If it's privately owned, it should "give back." Property owners and developers should recognize great public spaces as a special opportunity to better our city — and to earn community accolades. A high standard for excellence expresses civic pride, earns recognition, and gives back to the community. The private sector should provide, connect to, and/or support great public spaces that are accessible and open to all.

Design excellence. Make them beautiful, make them lively! Our spaces need and deserve top-notch professional planning and design, that reflects community input. A high design standard must be established, both for individual projects and places and for the larger interconnected citywide network of spaces. Funding and execution must stay the course, to ensure that design excellence truly comes to life.

People places. Spaces should be designed and improved in ways that welcome and engage the public, so that they are regularly and widely used. Populist and inclusive! Active programming should ensure that fun events occur often in our great public spaces. Wherever possible, make food and drink available, with nearby seating to encourage sociability. Provide a variety of well-designed spaces at different scales, with areas comfortable for one person, a small group, or a large gathering.

Keep us special, strengthen Austin. Our public spaces should be embraced as a way to reinforce Austin's special character, natural environment, and cultural history. They should look and feel uniquely Austin! As we invest in their greatness, we strengthen Austin as a great city. Great public spaces pay us back ten-fold in quality of life, civic attractiveness, tourism, economic development, and property value.

Sustainable, made for Central Texas. It's hot here! Outdoor spaces need plenty of shade - from trees, awnings, and shade structures. Breezes encouraged! Water and drinking fountains are priorities. Greenery and open space offer relief from the urban "heat island," while balancing the effects of increasing urban density. Design and construction practices should follow environmentally friendly and climate-action principles - including use of local, durable, low-impact materials and building methods.

Family friendly. Our public places need to be thoughtfully designed to be safe and fun for children, and for several generations to enjoy together. Play structures, small lawns, bike racks, climbable artwork, snow-cone stands, and splash fountains are encouraged. They should welcome and attract families, and encourage healthy outdoor activity and exercise. We all need places to play!

Clean, safe, secure. Places must be and feel safe, and be provided with good lighting, trash receptacles, enclosed areas for kids and dogs as appropriate, "eyes on the street" supervision, public safety support, and regular maintenance.

Design with nature. Landscaping should be generous, emphasizing native and drought-tolerant trees and plants, while providing habitat, food, and water for birds, butterflies, and desirable wildlife.

Music, art, performances, and celebrations. Our public places should provide wonderful settings for live music, concerts, art shows, live theater and dance, cultural celebrations, civic events and expression. As scale and context permit, key spaces should feature performance areas, plazas, and concession stands designed for such events.

Strengthen community. Great public spaces draw people from all walks of life to come together. They should be provided not only downtown, but in neighborhoods throughout Austin. They're a priority where homes may have minimal or no yards, as well as for transit planning. Ideally, anywhere in Austin should be no more than a five-minute walk or bike ride from a great public space.

Budget for greatness. Every relevant city project, urban plan, departmental capital improvements budget, and bond package should be reviewed against the principles of great public spaces. We must allocate and maintain the funding required to set a high bar for our public realm. High-quality, durable materials should be selected for long-lasting construction.

Commitment and On-going Investment. Great public spaces should be established as a fundamental community value for Austin – much like our commitment to environmental sustainability. That requires ongoing commitment to their creation, funding, maintenance, and continual improvement.

Great public spaces are a great unifier. They touch all of our lives and priorities, make people feel good about Austin, and weave through many core issues for our community now. Let's make the 2010's our Great Public Spaces decade!



Resources

Local:

- Urban Design Guidelines ("Plazas and Open Space" section), created by the city of Austin Design Commission (www.ci.austin.tx.us/downtown/downloads/urban_design_guidelines_for_austin.pdf)
- Downtown Open Space and Parks Plan, developed by ROMA Austin team, (www.ci.austin.tx.us/downtown)

National:

- Project for Public Spaces (www.pps.org)
- Trust for Public Land, Center for City Park Excellence (www.tpl.org)