



Meeting Notes

November 17, 2020

Call to Order

Recording started by Teresa Geisheker.

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

There were 78 participants in the meeting.

Welcome by Co-Chairs

Mr. Garza did the welcome, roll call and presented the speaker rules.

Director's report

Margaret Wallace Brown, Director, Planning & Development Department welcomed everyone to the 3rd Livable Places Action Committee meeting and explained that the purpose of the meeting is to identify issues that are going to be covered in next two years and to hear about best practices across the nation.

Identify issues to address & build consensus

Recap of the project schedule presented at the two previous committee meetings.

- Staff presented the project's goals and few minor technical amendments at the previous committee meetings. The ordinance language is currently being drafted for the technical amendments that the Committee reviewed and provided consensus.
- Staff also recapped various codes that are going to be affected with this project and those codes are Chapters 26, 33, 42 and the IDM.

A goal of the meeting is to establish consensus on issues to be addressed by the Committee. These issues have been identified over the years with the help of the Planning Commission. Staff shared this list of topics with the Committee members via email. Staff asked the committee to provide feedback and establish consensus on this list.

The purpose of the project is to update the codes to create opportunities for affordability, walkability and equity. A big part of this is also to explore the varieties of housing types based on the current demographic needs.

- The number of nuclear family size is decreasing.
- The percentage of single person households is increasing.
- There is an increasing need to provide housing for single person households.
- Some missing middle housing is currently being provided. Some of these are duplexes and townhomes but there are not many "missing middle housing" options in Houston.

Staff presented Dan Parolek’s video on “Missing Middle Housing”. He is the founder of Opticos Design, who inspired a new movement for housing choices by coining the term the “Missing Middle Housing.”

Video: An Introduction to Missing Middle Housing

- Missing Middle Housing relates primarily to a range of housing types including duplexes, quadruplexes, courtyard apartments, etc. These housing types were stopped building.
- There is a mismatch between what the market is looking for and what have been provided in the last 30-40 years.
- There is an increasing demand in walkability and livability.
- Two types of groups that are looking for walkable areas are the millennials and the baby boomers.
- The second reason to think about “missing middle housing” is the dramatic shift in household demographics.
- 30% of households are single persons.
- 75-80% households will not have children by 2025.
- The demographics are shifting, and it is important to think differently about the types of housing that should be provided.

After watching the video, staff restated the increasing need to consider missing middle housing, which is a big part of this project, and the importance to increase the affordability in housing. Staff also shared the list of topics that was referenced at the beginning of the meeting. For the ease of understanding, the list was categorized into three sections: (1) Density and Affordability; (2) Access; and (3) Infrastructure. Staff will talk about all these topics in details.

Ms. Wallace Brown announced and welcomed Council Member Sallie Alcorn, who joined the meeting.

1. Single-Family Residential Lot

Staff introduced the minimum standards required for a single-family residential lot.

- The minimum lot size in the city is 3,500 sq. ft.
- The minimum lot size in the ETJ is 5,000 sq. ft.
- The minimum frontage is 20’.
- The maximum size for a secondary dwelling unit is 900 sq. ft.

Issues to think about

- Why is 900 sq. ft. is the maximum size for a secondary dwelling unit? Is this an adequate size?
- Per the code, a duplex with attached units doesn’t have any size limitations and can be of any size. However, a detached unit has a size limitation of 900 sq. ft. Why is that?
- Explore the option where property owners can rent the additional unit, which would provide an additional income for families and support in a situation when there is a need.
- How can we accommodate changes in demographics and related housing needs?

Staff presented different types of housing that Houston regulations already allow.

- **Traditional houses:** A single family house that could have attached or detached units. A standard lot size is about 50' x 100'. These must have frontage on a public or private street.
- **Permanent Access Easement (PAE) Development:** A PAE is a private street at least 28' wide that serves single family houses. The private streets are privately maintained by the homeowner association or property owners.
- **Shared driveway development:** Multiple houses access a public street through one shared driveway. Frequently, two 5,000 sf lots are combined to create six smaller lots with access via a shared driveway. The shared driveway is also privately maintained by the property owners.
- **10'/17' Development.** A single-family lot on a public street where the house is located 10' from the property line and the garage door is located 17' from the property line.
- **A shared driveway on the rear of several lots.**
The garage entry is provided from the back of the lots and the shared driveway functions more like an alley. The front of the lots is not interrupted making the street safer.
- **Flag lots:** one or more lots are subdivided into multiple lots with a shared easement providing access from the lots to a public street. The easement resembles a flag staff.
- **Traditional lot:** One large single-family lot was subdivided into 3 single-family individual lots. These lots are large enough to have adequate frontage on a public street and still have a good lot size to provide a secondary dwelling unit on the back of the lot.

Lot access How access is being provided to the lots is important. The code allows developers to create lots with access from the front (often called front-loading lots) or lots taking access from an alley. Narrow front-loaded lots result in uncomfortable and dangerous sidewalks for pedestrians and leave little room for on-street parking.

- When a property is being subdivided, is it possible to encourage developments to take access from the rear of the lots via an alley or shared driveway?
- What kind of incentives can we have to encourage these kinds of alley or shared driveway developments?

Issues Identified

The following are the issues with lot standards:

- Size for detached secondary unit (ADU) is too small
- Middle income housing types (triplex, fourplex) are not allowed.
- Minimum lot size for simple lots prevents small lot developments
- Lot standards (Frontage, width, lot size reduction) may prohibit tiny house development
- Vehicular access to lots causes conflicts with pedestrians.

Committee discussion:

- Multiple driveways have become a real problem and don't do anything but eliminate parking spaces from the streets.
- With the 10'/17' building lines, cars would block the sidewalks, which is a major issue.

-
- Triplexes and fourplexes are not being built anymore. Instead, condos, townhomes and mid-rises are being built which are getting more expensive for low income households and smaller families. What can we do to incentive those developments?

Comments

- In a 50' wide typical lot, about 10'-12' goes towards driveway to get the cars behind the property. That means a 0' side building line is needed on one side of the lot, which will conflict with the building codes.
- We also need to think about the mass of the building itself to provide shade along the streets in terms of increasing walkability.
- The setback is one of the key drivers in building missing middle housing.
- Identify the key drivers in order to promote other housing types. Housing pathology should be discussed in the context of the current social, economic and demographic patterns. It is important to understand the neighborhood patterns.
- List the economic drivers, development drivers and the social drivers.
- Parking has a profound impact on development patterns here in Houston and the front-loading townhouses create a pedestrian environment incredibly hostile and is not considered enjoyable pedestrian experience.
- Consider altering the parking requirements in residential developments.
- Find out how did we got here?
- Why triplexes, fourplexes and garage apartments are not being built?
- How did we get to the lot size that we required now?
- Why alleys are not a good idea anymore?
- It is important to know the reasons behind the issues or current regulations.
- Finance is a critical part for any housing program and must be considered. Some financing may not be available for quadruplex or large accessory dwelling units as a singles-family homes.
- Consider driveways and intersection spacing for residential developments.
- Address concerns with existing public alleys in terms of ownership and maintenance.
- Consider the existing rights-of-ways, specifically, open ditches and inconvenient areas where it would be difficult to move sidewalk out of the street.
- Make right-of-way improvements for existing neighborhoods that have these issues in place.

Luis Guajardo (with Kinder Institute) stated for the record that there is local information available regarding living along and nontraditional household types. He invited everyone to read the State of House report to find more information on household issues. The Kinder Institute is also in the process of publishing a new report about the relationship between gentrification and housing stocks and different types of housing.

Ms. Bandi announced that the State of Housing report is also available in the Let's Talk Houston website under Articles.

2. Multi-Family

Staff provided an example of a traditional single-family lot (45' x 150') with two existing structures. If a third structure was added to the site, the property must be platted as a reserve and must comply with all the reserve standards. There are certain requirements with respect to the frontage of the reserve, the size of the reserve and the width of right-of-way it has frontage on. A lot with 45' of frontage would not meet the reserve frontage requirement and would have to request a variance for that reason. The committee is being asked to consider standards for reserves so that smaller multi-family developments can be allowed.

Another example of a multi-family development. This example showed an existing duplex with a proposed additional unit at the rear of the property. However, the site didn't meet the multi-family requirements. A private street was required to be provided at the front of the property for emergency access. This requirement would become impractical and unnecessary as the site already abutting a public street. The multifamily requirements must be re-evaluated with the perspective of encouraging triplexes and fourplexes without enforcing stringent multi-family requirements, which are mainly designed for larger multi-family developments.

Issues Identified

The following are the two issues identified for multi-family.

- Multi-family regulations not conducive to smaller multi-family developments
- Missing middle housing types discouraged (triplex, fourplex)
- Create tools to make the process easier and build smaller multi-family units without having to request variances

3. Reserve Standards

A reserve could be any uses except single-family residential use. The use of the reserve can be identified, such as commercial, recreational, open space etc. or can be identified as unrestricted. Per the code, a reserve shall have a minimum size of 5,000 sq. ft. If a developer would like to develop a small multi-family development in a reserve smaller than 5,000 sq. ft., then a variance will be required to allow the size of the reserve to be less than 5,000 sq. ft. This is one of the barriers that must be addressed, and a solution is needed to avoid the need of requesting a variance.

4. Compensating open space

Compensating Open Space (COS) is a shared open space provided in a development to compensate for lack of green space on lots that are less than the minimum lot size. However, the ordinance doesn't regulate the location of the COSCOS is often provided as a strip along the periphery of the development, which would not meet the intent of the ordinance. COS should be a reserve in the middle of the development that is accessible to all lots in a development. Staff would like for the committee to address and consider how the green spaces should be designed.

Issues Identified

The following issues were identified for reserves.

- Reserve size to allow smaller multi-family units
- Multi-family regulations must be evaluated
- Reserve frontage
- Depth of the frontage
- Avoid narrow open space reserves along the periphery
- Access to open spaces from within the development
- Recreation reserve along a Type 2 PAE

Comments

- Are there other alternative mechanisms for developments that may contribute some sort of development fee that goes toward the maintenance of public park or land inside the urban cores instead of narrow COS reserves along the periphery.
- Consider creating a more unified standard to accept open space.
- Think of ways to provide incentives by giving credits on COS.

Ms. Bandi clarified that the ordinance currently requires park/open space to be dedicated with for all new living units. The developers can pay toward parks or provide a private park within the development. COS is different from the parks' requirements. COS requirements allow developers to reduce the lot sizes from 3,500 sq. ft. to 1,400 sq. ft. Generally, in the city limits, there are other performance standards for reduced lot sizes (27 dwelling units per acre with 60% lot coverage and 150 sq. ft. permeable area for each lot). A majority of the developments in the urban core use the density requirements instead of the COS requirements. However, Planning Department continues to receive proposals for developments that opt-in to the COS requirements and the proposed COS reserve is not very usable. We would like for the committee to address this topic.

5. Residential Buffering

The residential buffering ordinance attempts to mitigate the impacts of high-density development on adjacent single-family structures. Staff explained that there are concerns about this ordinance related to lighting, noise and height and would like for the committee to address some of these concerns.

6. Conservation District

Some neighborhoods are historic in nature but don't have a mechanism to protect that character as new development comes. Staff would like to offer new tools for to protect the neighborhood character. The Conservation District Focus Group is currently working on creating these tools. The next Conservation District Focus Group meeting is scheduled on November 23rd at 10:30 AM to 12:00 PM. The meeting link will be posted on the Livable Places website.

Issues Identified

The following are the issues identified:

- Impact of dense development on residential neighborhoods.
- Consider new tools to preserve neighborhood character.

7. Parking

The first question to consider is about the number of parking spaces required for residential developments. Do we need two parking spaces or two car garages for every single-family dwelling unit? Based on the context, the proximity to transit lines and the demographic need, there is an increase demand in walkability. We would like for the committee to consider what can be changed to make an accommodation when somebody doesn't want a dwelling unit with two car garages when they don't even use it?

Also, the code requires any development in the city with a shared driveway or Type 2 PAE to provide one guest parking space for every 6 dwelling units. We would like to find out if one guest parking space is adequate for 6 dwelling units. Staff also had a concern regarding the location of a guest parking space that may not be accessible to all the lots within the development. One solution to consider is to provide a pedestrian connection when discussing shared driveway and Type 2 PAE requirements.

Issues Identified

The following are the issues related to parking identified by staff:

- Parking per single family dwelling unit
- Guest parking location and access
- Parking for multi-family residential developments
- Parking for development along transit lines

Mr. Garza reiterated that after Chapter 26 ordinance was re-visited and updated, the code was already outdated. It is time to revisit parking requirements again.

Comments

- Consider sharing parking spaces with nearby parking garage facilities to meet parking requirements. This process is done with commercial developments but not for residential developments.

Ms. Bandi welcomed **Ms. Dipti Mathur** to continue the presentation.

8. Access

Ms. Mathur discussed access and infrastructure needs.

Currently, City of Houston has a variety of street types: major thoroughfares, collector streets, local streets, transit corridor streets, etc. Some of the questions to be addressed are: How is access provided? What do we have and what do we want? Should there be different standards for access needs on each type of street? What type of access should be there? Direct loading? Side loading?

9. Points of access

The code also regulates points of access. Per the code, two points of access are required for a subdivision with 150 lots or more. These points of access are important for emergency purposes and to protect the public. However, further evaluation is still needed to determine if 150 is the right number. Should this requirement be amended? Or, should there be cumulative requirements as the number of lots increase? We also need to evaluate if the street connections should be public streets or could it be public streets privately maintained? These have been a discussion for a long time in the Planning Commission and a solution is needed to address these issues.

10. Cul-de-sac

A cul-de-sac is a public street with one point of access or a dead-end street with only one way out. Per the code, a cul-de-sac could serve no more than 35 lots and cannot exceed 350' in length. This requirement was created based on the infrastructure needs regarding pressure of the water lines. But these are no longer a concern per HPW. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the cul-de-sac requirements and update the code. The main purpose of this topic is to find out if a cul-de-sac should have a limit and what should be the limit.

Staff presented an example of an infill development to describe issues related to the cul-de-sac requirements. Can more than 150 lots be considered for infill development? How should we consider traffic needs? Does the requirement of two points of access discourage infill developments?

11. Building line standards

Building line requirements for residential or commercial development often determines the design of the building and the relation to the street. Single-family developments, where the houses are sitting very close to the street, create a safer and pedestrian-friendly environment.

- Sidewalk is provided.
- Dwelling units have access to the sidewalk.
- Balconies overlooking provide eyes on the streets.
- Vehicular access is provided from the back of the lots via an alley or shared driveway.

A 25' building line along a major thoroughfare creates less pedestrian-friendly developments. With the 25' building line, a parking lot is provided in the front of the building making the site less approachable. These types of developments are more accessible to vehicles versus to pedestrians. What we should do about this and where should we go from here on commercial properties?

Ms. Mathur provided an example of an existing commercial development with a 0' building line. With the 0' building line, the site is more accessible to pedestrians and still provides some head-in parking. Traffic and planners may not like head-on parking, but we should consider providing some mix of parking solutions and where the building is located relative to the street.

Another topic for discussion is residential structures with minimum setback requirements that encourage parking in the front of the structure and creates obstacles for safe pedestrian movements.

12. Access to collector streets

Collector streets are an important part of the city's street grid. We currently have major and minor collectors, but the code doesn't define or create standards for minor and major collectors.

The recent amendments made to the MTFP provided more information on collector streets. We also need to align the codes with the MTFP in respect to width, access and intersection spacing to maintain consistency.

13. Collector streets intersection spacing

The code provides intersection spacing requirements for major thoroughfares and local streets. The intersection spacing requirements for collector streets are not very clear. This topic will be discussed with the purpose to update the code. The goals are to define major and minor collector streets and to provide requirements for each collector street. The committee will also have an opportunity to consider access to these collector streets.

14. Loading berth requirements

An apartment complex is required to provide at least one off-street loading berth. The committee will address this topic to evaluate if the current requirements for loading berths are adequate or should the loading berth be required based on the size of the apartment or multi-family development.

Comments

- Transit should be one of the main drivers for the conversations related to parking, lot size, accessibility, etc.
- Make smart choices based on route frequencies and different transit service types.
- It would be helpful to see examples of multiple intersections to see the dynamics of the level of services when considering the provision for collector streets.

15. Development and Infrastructure Needs

The requirements and standards for utilities and basic services currently conflict with our subdivision design standards. Shared driveway developments may be considered a good design as it helps to maintain good pedestrian realms. However, these developments are built with access to very narrow public streets. Houston Public Works and Solid Waste Department often face with many challenges and obstacles to accommodate the infrastructure needs. For example, there might not be enough room to place garbage cans or a master water meter. This is another topic that will be discussed.

Staff presented an example of an infill development in a very low-density area with larger lots. We are starting to see many redevelopments with smaller and denser lots in areas where the infrastructure needs are not adequate. This is another topic to be considered. Currently, there are no requirements to provide street improvements.

Issues Identified

-
- Number of lots along a cul-de-sac
- Points of access for Infill v Greenfield development
- 150 lots threshold for two points of access
- Cumulative requirement as the number of lots increase
- Connection to privately maintained public road
- Building line requirements
- Loading berth requirements
- Intersection spacing and access requirements for collector streets
- Residential properties fronting and taking driveway access to Collector streets
- Development and Infrastructure needs

Typical Meeting

Staff described what a typical meeting will look like. A typical meeting will consist of staff presentation of the topic with recommendations followed by discussion and consensus.

The next step is to consider each topic individually.

Meeting Dates of 2021

Staff shared the meeting dates of 2021. The next meeting dates are:

January 12 th	February 9 th
March 9 th	April 20 th
May 18 th	June 15 th
July 13 th	August 10 th
September 7 th	October 5 th
November 9 th	December 21 st

Best Practices Study presentation

The Planning Department hired a consultant, Lionheart Places, to study the best practices across other jurisdictions and cities to learn how other cities are addressing housing needs and providing affordable housing options. Ms. Bandi introduced the founder and CEO of Lionheart, Rebecca Leonard, and her team, Abby Gillfillan, to present their findings. This report will be available on the Livable Places website.

Ms. Leonard and Ms. Gillfillan provided a presentation on residential development best practices. They explored City of Houston's existing residential development requirements and existing planning framework. They studied incentives for affordable housing, density, and missing middle- and lower-income housing. They also explored some of the barriers to providing good public realms around developments. They researched over 10 cities and documented all the information into a user-friendly document.

Comments/Questions

Mr. Juan Soto was interested to learn more on how public participation will play a role in City of Houston.

Ms. Leonard was able to help the city with Plan Houston efforts back in 2014-15. The outreach was very broad. She is envisioning that some outreach will be associated with the code revisions. In order to get some aggressive ideas into the codes and tackle some of the issues that Houston is facing, a broad support will be needed. Having a broad outreach effort is very important and this committee is a good start.

Ms. Megan Sigler stated that single-family houses built for rent are becoming a gap filler. This is a growing trend in Houston. She suggested Lionheart to share some information on single-family rental approach.

Ms. Gillfillan explained that the single-family for rent developments would help in the affordability spectrum in a community. These developments are booming in cities like Phoenix and Austin.

Ms. Leonard added that two cities, City of Los Angeles and City of Seattle, have adopted new codes, specifically addressing that product type – residential small lot zoning district.

Mr. Kirby Liu mentioned that the focus on grid connectivity within subdivisions is great conceptually in an urbanist standpoint. But speaking from experience with developers, the maintenances of HOA are considered barriers for affordability and can be hectic. This is something that should be taken into consideration when making recommendations related to affordability impacts on street connectivity issues that it might create. Secondly, affordability is another important part of livability. In his opinion,

a greater in-depth understanding is needed to understand how the policies have created equity and affordable housing in other cities.

Homework Activity

Ms. Henson mentioned that the summary of the best practices survey, presented by Lionheart, will be linked to Let'sTalkHouston.org. She invited all members to visit the website to find additional information and some videos. Also, mentioned an article about Making Room. All these materials will be used referenced points moving forward.

- Read best practices study report
- Watch videos: Missing Middle & Accessory Dwelling Units
- Read article: Making Room

Next Meeting

December 8, 2020 – 3:00pm through 5:00pm

- The next meeting will cover the buffering ordinance requirements.
- Staff will identify concerns and issues related to the buffering ordinance followed by discussion.

Public Comments

Mr. Randall Baxley stated that the overall presentation doesn't relate to the north side of Houston. In general, this area has not yet been gentrified. This area still has open ditches, small streets and no public access from the rear. He advised to visit and explore this area to learn what is existing before making plans. The plans being made have nothing to do with the existing conditions of this area.

Meeting Adjourned at 5:13pm