



Meeting Notes

September 6, 2022

Call to Order

Recording started by Tammi Williamson.

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. 19 committee members were present during roll call. There were 83 participants (including committee members).

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

- The Livable Places process is a marathon and not a sprint – but we're in the home stretch.
- I've talked to lots of organizations and other groups, and our work is getting a terrific response. The idea of cottage-style and small-lot developments are exciting to people. Fourplexes/six-plexes, garage apartments and ADUs, many people remember these from college days and like them.
- Shoutout to the ADU book group, which won an award from the TX chapter of the APA Houston Section, with an exciting announcement coming up next week.

Meeting Agenda: Suvidha Bandi introduced the agenda items for the rest of the meeting.

- Draft Residential Buffering Ordinance Comments
- Shared Driveway Units – Fronting the Street
- Street Widening Requirement
- Homework Activity & Next Meeting
- Public Comments

Draft Residential Buffering Ordinance

Suvidha Bandi: We're soliciting any questions/comments about this ordinance.

Draft Residential Buffering Ordinance Questions? Comments?:

Sonny Garza: Want to recognize the stand-in for Yuhyana Mahmud.

Curtis Davis: Question – if we do have comments on the written draft, should we mark up and send to you?

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, please do so within 2 weeks.

Matthew Camp: Quick question on buffering. Is the "abutting property" also referring to those across the street?

Suvidha Bandi: It's anything within 30' of the high-rise or urban-style buildings, so likely not across the street.

Sandy Stevens: Will this draft be available to the public at some point?

Suvidha Bandi: It's already posted on the website and will be open to public comments by the end of this week. It should be open for comments for the next six weeks.

Margaret Wallace Brown: Suvidha, will you outline the next steps, such as deadline for comments, target date for PC agenda, and send it in an email to this committee?

Suvidha Bandi: Yes, will do.

Peter Freedman: I'd just like to clarify something. There was a mention of the multifamily residential. I think it was a different set of number of homes. Has that that now been passed? Is that actually in the rules, or is that part of this whole buffering process?

Suvidha Bandi: That is referring to MUR as different from single-family and larger scale multifamily. It's not in place now and the first reference to MUR will be in the buffering standards, but the performance standards for MUR will be in the housing recommendations a little later.

Shared Driveway Units—Fronting the Street

Suvidha Bandi: In May/June, we went over overall housing recommendations and realized this topic needed special mention.

- performance standards for building line on front loading lots: 10' building line, 17' for garages.
- Separate Performance Standard for properties that front shared driveways – allows a 5' building line on local/collector street if units fronting the street have a front door facing street, and provide pedestrian access to public street.
- Intent of Current Ordinance: To “foster a design framework applicable to the city” and ensure pedestrian use of sidewalks is not impeded. The challenge is that “front door” is not defined, and the ordinance has been stretched too thin in actual use. We're seeing that built conditions do not accurately reflect the intent of the ordinance, even if they meet the letter of the ordinance.

Shared Driveway Units—Fronting the Street Questions? Comments?:

Sonny Garza: Here's my take. We're trying to accomplish “eyes on the street” and improve safety/comfort, and provide a walkable environment. These examples often don't appear to have a front door opening on to living space, but rather just a garage or storage space. We need language to avoid this.

Kirby Liu: On the bottom left image [see recording at 22:00] it looks like a corner porch. It's not technically facing the street. Is the door itself more important, or is the porch? It looks like they tried to meet the intent, but not necessarily the letter of the ordinance.

Suvidha Bandi: Exactly. What can we write to improve the letter of the ordinance and make the performance standards more clear.

Curtis Davis: The goal is to articulate a set of design objectives for the urban environment. To the extent that an ordinance can reference examples, it may help. However, on the slide “Front door vs a door,” the example at left may or may not meet design objectives. Architecturally, the building has a front face to the street, with a door and a gate. If we’re concerned about safety, we want eyes, people, entries, and signs of daily life fronting the street. My concern is that even a front door into living space in *plan* could still have an elevation that presents anonymity to the street and doesn’t meet design objectives.

Zion Escobar: When it comes to safety/eyes on the street, the door intent doesn’t really match the concept (as most doors are opaque). There should be some factor in the rules for windows to actually provide eyes on the street, as opposed to just a door.

Sonny Garza: Well, would windows also have to be facing living space vs a garage or storage?

Zion Escobar: That’s a lot of nuances—a requirement like that would have to be reviewed by legal. “Dummy” windows are as bad as a dummy door.

Peter Freedman: In these examples, I’m not really seeing any added security there, unless someone is standing by the window or door. To answer the question asked, a requirement could be based on the door opening to conditioned area, or an architectural requirement for a porch or deck (space that would be utilized).

Suvidha Bandi: The intent is both to create the urban feel and create a sense of safety, where homes are facing the street instead of a blank wall. Safer walking conditions improve walkability, while also improving neighborhood character on the street.

Sonny Garza: Like Motel 6, “we’ll leave the light on for you.” May be a psychological effect, but lights on in windows on the street do make a difference.

Suvidha Bandi: To that point, one of the cities we looked at as a precedent in Florida used lighting and design features as a requirement on front facades.

Mike Dishberger: I’m having issues with the notion of feeling safer on these streets – it’s funny, these images all have homes with big wrought iron fences because *they* don’t feel safe. The front door to me is not the particular issue, as Kirby brought up with the corner-entry example. The other example I have is that on our homes we inset the door a few feet and have it side-facing, not actually seen, so maybe we require a door be within a certain distance of a wall parallel to the road. Maybe we also put in a requirement for certain square footage of windows. In summation, #1 entry requirement is maybe not necessarily *facing* the street, as it can feel unsafe to residents. #2, the corner solution is good.

Kirby Liu: Maybe the idea of a door is a red herring. I’ve seen other codes with minimum/max glazing requirements. Basically, to avoid these gray zones and people faking “front” doors, why don’t we set a minimum % of glazing on the front elevation? Similarly, with lighting, that glazing on the front façade will help cast light onto the street.

Suvidha Bandi: Having the entrance **raised a bit, and basing it on conditioned space**, and using design elements to emphasize the “front,” were among things I saw in other ordinances.

Megan Sigler: The reality is that the first-floor footprint is often just a garage and stairwell – you won’t have much activity on that floor regardless of windows or front doors.

Suvidha Bandi: Slide 10 shows an example of a front room with windows and just stairs.

Sonny Garza: What I typically see is ground floor with front room, stairs, garage, a bedroom and maybe one bath. Couldn’t we just tweak those front units so that the door (and nothing else, really) turns to face the street without changing anything else?

Megan Sigler: Sometimes we already do that for aesthetic purposes depending on the site. You can do it, and you can have the “front” architectural features, but I don’t know if you achieve the safety and the look.

Sonny Garza: Several speakers have brought this up – is it a red herring? Does it look safer, without *being* safer?

Suvidha Bandi: Most plans I see do have *some* living space on the ground floor, so it’s an option.

Sonny Garza: Anecdotally, I live in a 100-year-old house with an original front door that is all glass!

Curtis Davis: We’re struggling here with how to develop ordinance language. Ordinance should focus on design *objective*, not necessarily the *tactics*. We want to achieve a perception of occupation on the street, an image on the street, without necessarily actually having that occupation. We can’t require a person sitting on the porch.

Suvidha Bandi: Thank you. Because this is an optional standard, it’s not required for applicants to do it. It’s voluntary so we can add design elements and other criteria if we need to (front door, porches, etc.).

Kirby Liu: If it’s economically viable, people will want to opt-in for that greater setback allowance. But how do we handle corner lots? I can imagine on corners people trying to gamify things to gain extra area on both frontages without really doing it. In a situation with row houses on an end-block lot, how would that building line bonus work? This is part of why I like establishing a glazing requirement as opposed to a front door requirement for the building line bonus.

Suvidha Bandi: By glazing, do you mean transparency or lighting?

Kirby Liu: Basically transparency, yeah. Some sort of windows.

Street Widening Requirement:

Muxian Fang: There are challenges in achieving the compact development goals due to street-widening requirements.

-
- **Background:** In 2013, the City Council adopted an ordinance to facilitate compact developments by amending requirements related to: shared driveways; building lines; and urban vs suburban development.
 - **Current Requirements:** All commercial developments and single-family residential developments with shared driveways or Permanent Access Easements (PAEs) shall comply with current street widening requirements. **Table showing current street widening requirements based on existing pavement width in front of a property:** See recording.
 - **Requirements' Intent:** Mainly applicable to open ditch streets and to improve fire protection and traffic safety.
 - **Requirements' Unintended Consequences:** Current rules encourage front loader housing types over shared driveway housing types. **Graphics showing current street widening requirements' unintended consequences:** See recording. Piecemeal pavement widening also creates inconsistent street pavement widths, can negatively impact roadway drainage, and doesn't always improve fire protection.
 - **Potential Alternatives: Table showing 2 potential policy alternatives:** See recording.

Street Widening Requirement Questions? Comments?:

Sonny Garza: Walk us through what Alternative 1 (removing from Chapter 42 but leaving the requirement in the IDM) means to developers?

Muxian Wang: Basically the status quo would remain, but instead of the requirement being a condition of approval on the plat, it simply becomes a matter of IDM compliance at the development stage.

Suvidha Bandi: I would add that it doesn't solve the inequitable requirement, but it makes the process a little bit more practical. By removing from Ch. 42, it would no longer require a plat condition. The planning/platting process will go a bit faster.

Curtis Davis: This is a case of policy bumping heads with municipal capital planning. If a development on a given block is required to do the widening, why can't the developer instead contribute to a fee-in-lieu fund? The City could float a bond to fund projects in conjunction with these collected fees. The bond would be capitalized on these funds, which would be replenished over time. We shouldn't be shy with our recommendations, even if municipal finance is outside of our scope.

Mike Dishberger: I would pick Alternative 1. Usually, it's little pieces of a road that have broken off. It's a City of Houston problem in areas with bad roads/old infrastructure. Alternative 2 means developers will just avoid building in areas in need of widening altogether. The piecemeal approach is where we're at, and it's bad either way. This problem is typically on open ditch streets. It shouldn't be housed in Chapter 42—it's slowing down the process.

This question brings up a secondary point— why do we remove street parking on a whole block when we build a shared driveway project on a street between 18 and 20 feet wide? Where are guests going to park? It needs to be addressed.

Suvidha Bandi: We have public works officials here. If anyone wants to make a comment, please do.

Tyron McDaniel: I know of two projects in Acres Homes where we opted not to build because of the street widening requirement. This is especially impactful on affordable housing projects by ballooning costs. A more collaborative solution would be ideal, whether it's establishing a fund or something else.

Ahmed Ghaly: A small comment on the no parking sign requirement. This came after discussion with the Fire Department due to safety issues narrowing the street and impeding fire trucks.

Sonny Garza: That was our understanding. The issue becomes if there are ditches on both sides, where do people park? See Rice-Military as an example. The issue goes back to Fire Department and enforcement. People will still park illegally even with the signage. I think we need to find a solution that provides both safety and parking.

Neal Dikeman: It's just "nutty" to me that we do infrastructure project-by-project and developer-by-developer. It doesn't make sense. If you're going to fix the streets, then fix them. If you're not, or it isn't necessary, then don't force developers to do it one frontage at a time. It doesn't make sense at all: the whole concept is nutty. If I had to pick, I'd pick Alternative 1.

Peter Freedman: I like the fee-in-lieu idea, but I agree with Neal Dikeman. Doing it piecemeal just doesn't make sense. We run into an issue where open-ditch roads, five-foot sidewalks, and widening requirements combine to create a big burden.

Muxian Fang: It's helpful to hear these ideas because it's tough to figure these things out with internal discussions alone. Things like a fee-in-lieu would take a lot more work to figure out if they're feasible or not, but it's good to hear this feedback.

Curtis Davis: The good thing about this work is that you're surfacing problems that can't be fixed just by this Committee, or even through regulation alone. It's a call-to-arms for strategic thinking across departments. We need to adapt policy to fit infrastructure needs at the right scale and pace to fit the market. This is not just a question of regulation, but of fiscal and other policy. This city is big enough that it's no problem to float a bond to repair substandard streets, and a fee-in-lieu fund could reasonably support a bond issue to supplement (not override) the existing capital improvements process.

Sonny Garza: To summarize, we brought up a fee-in-lieu approach, and the consensus seems to be that the piecemeal approach is bad.

Neal Dikeman: Implementation of fee-in-lieu approach is problematic – especially if spending the funds is based on where they come from, and what neighborhoods are developing more than others. If the city wants to fix more streets, they need to raise the money and then fix them; if not, then stop making developers widen little random patches. The fee-in-lieu model is terribly prone to bias.

Suvidha Bandi: Keeping in mind the scope of the committee, perhaps the fee-in-lieu option could be considered in the future in collaboration with Public Works. It is just outside of our scope. Can we take it as consensus that Alternative 1 is the way to go?

Sonny Garza: Yes— hearing no objections, we have consensus in favor of Alternative 1.

Homework:

Tammi Williamson: Visit Let's letstalkhouston.org/livable-places to:

- Read articles
- Provide Input
- Spread the word
- We will be publishing an article soon talking about front yards, patios, and the “neighborhood feel” of the front of properties as an upward trend.

Next Meeting: October 4th.

Public Comment:

Richard Mazzarino: I've been an Inner Loop homebuilder for 16 years. Related to front doors facing the street, our customers have never really asked us for this. The biggest selling point has been backyard space and privacy. To Mike Dishberger's point, people don't want front yards or doors on the street. I disagree that simply having a front door facing the street means safety. Our customers are more worried about people looking in than eyes on the street, and we are selling more security devices than ever.

Ricky Cardenas, Jr.: I wanted to hear more about the safety implications of front door facing vs. not facing the street. How is it safer than not?

Suvidha Bandi: Related information to this question is already within MuniCode Houston. I'll put my number in the chat and he can call me and talk.

Dr. Patricia Spikes: One quick question: will these requirements apply only to newly built neighborhoods, or citywide?

Suvidha Bandi: It will apply to all newly built developments throughout the city limit.

Suvidha Bandi: Just a reminder that all Committee members have two weeks to get back with questions or comments on the draft ordinance.

Sonny Garza: Hearing no other discussion or comments, meeting adjourned.

Meeting adjourned at 4:29 p.m.