

July 23–26, 2021

The Palm District: Austin's Cultural Hub

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Austin, TX DAT Report



Disclaimer

The ideas represented in the following report are those of the American Institute of Architects' design assistance team, based on our observations of the Palm District and its existing plans, the insights gleaned from the City's virtual public workshops and survey, and the ideas shared with us about the area and the aspirations for it in small workshops with a range of stakeholders. The virtual process has informed our thoughts and this report represents our best professional recommendations in the public interest. We do not serve a client in this endeavor. The report, and the process that produced it, is a public service to the Austin community.

The ideas captured here represent four intensive days of work (July 23-26, 2021) and the information available to us at the time of this writing. We do not expect this report to be followed as verbatim, prescriptive advice. This work represents a beginning – we hope a new beginning – for the area. It should be understood as a developmental tool, and we expect the community will expand on these ideas and amend them as you make it your own. This report serves as an opening mechanism to begin the necessary public work and we expect the ideas to evolve and change as you utilize it and as the Palm District begins to take shape through the public processes to follow.

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Introduction



Project Background

The City of Austin and the American Institute of Architects’ design assistance teams have a long history. Previous design assistance teams have served the city in the 1990s to assist with the planning and design of downtown Austin, and again in 2012 to provide guidance for the South Central Waterfront. In late 2019, Austin applied to the AIA for a Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) to provide recommendations on the future of the newly designated Palm District east of downtown. In February 2020, AIA Team leader Cheryl Morgan and staff visited Austin to conduct an initial scoping mission for the project. This visit occurred just weeks before the onset of the global COVID pandemic, which subsequently postponed the full community project indefinitely.

Virtual Format and Refined Project Scope

In January 2021, City staff contacted the AIA to explore the possibility of offering a circumscribed version of its design assistance team services in a virtual format. The virtual format was scheduled to complement and learn from the city’s formal planning process for the Palm District that is ongoing. Given the constraint that the national team would not physically visit the city, imposing necessary restrictions on its ability to design or analyze beyond broad parameters, the scope was narrowed to four themes, captured below as articulated by the local project committee:

Potential Outcome	Theme
Best practices and recommendations for equitable Transit Oriented Development in the district based on development of Capital Metro Blue Line, Gold Line and future I 35 Reconstruction.	Equitable Transit Oriented Development
Best practices and recommendations for partnerships and incentives and value capture methods to preserve cultural resources and creative spaces, to address past and future displacement, and leverage public and private investments in the district.	Affordability and Cultural Resources
Explore urban form recommendations and land use policies and regulations to foster an active and vibrant district for all.	Urban Design and Land Use Regulations
Recommendations for building on environmental assets in the district and connecting social equity to environmental sustainability.	Environment, Equity

A design assistance team was formed from across the country (see team roster) to serve this role and provide a fresh set of outside eyes and unencumbered analysis and recommendations for the Palm District. In preparation for their work, the team reviewed existing plans and background information about the district, its key sub-districts and projects, and adjacent areas.

What We Learned: Public Priorities for the Palm District

In June 2021, the city’s official planning process for the Palm District kicked off with a public survey and a series of virtual public workshops hosted by the city on June 15th and 16th. AIA team members were able to join and listen to the workshop discussions, as well as review the survey findings to inform our work concerning public priorities and aspirations for the future of the Palm District. The following summary captures the main themes and insights the team learned from the public participation and engagement events.

Key Themes

Affordable Housing

In a city growing as dramatically as Austin, it will come as no surprise that maximizing opportunities for affordable housing is a key public priority for the Palm District. From the public survey responses, it was clear that not only is affordable housing a public priority, but there is a real sense of urgency about making a public commitment to it and an understanding of the real estate value of this district to contribute to that goal. Citizens seemed willing to have maximum density here if it incorporated housing for all income levels. These feelings were reinforced by the public workshops held virtually by the city.

Representative Comments:

“Build housing and upzone. That’s what downtown should be if this city is to stay affordable and friendly.”

“It is perverse to say you are honoring the cultural legacy of the former residents while at the same time kicking them out. Affordable housing should be the top priority, do not waste the space that is still available.”

“I believe the plan for this district can and should preserve the historically and culturally important aspects of the Palm School and Palm Park, while also making efficient use of this critical urban real estate to create more places for people to live, regardless of what their income level may be. The housing crisis in Austin demands that the city make living space for our residents a priority, and that this living space be allocated equitably across income levels.”

“This area needs affordable housing to accommodate all the people who work in this area.”

“I would love to see portions of the Palm School site be used as affordable / income restricted housing. This could be done while preserving the school, and may help alleviate the displacement that’s occurring on the near east side.”

“The city-owned land where the Palm School is represents a great opportunity to build more housing while preserving the existing building and Palm Park. I would encourage the city to utilize this land for as much high-density affordable housing as feasible.”

“I would like to see public land in this area, especially the historic Palm School property, be developed into affordable housing. This is possible without impacting the historic school. Housing people needs to be a top priority for Austin, given the unaffordability of this city and the growing number of people without homes who now camp nearby.”

“I hope this process is used to provide for many more people to have affordable options to live and work in this walkable, healthy place.”

The Narrative of Displacement & Identity

It is clear from the public conversations that the Palm District is inextricably tied to a long-standing history that includes the narrative of displacement. Many Austin residents are both aware and knowledgeable about this legacy and cite the 1928 Master Plan and its overt policy of race-based displacement, as well as the impacts from the development of the highway and the police headquarters. While the most negative symbols of that history remain, the proud heritage of the former community remains a story largely untold, and one that needs acknowledgment and tangible representation. As one participant noted, the history of the area is “tied to the trauma of separation,” including the displacement of the existing community, the construction of the I-35 highway as a barrier to the downtown for East Austin, and placement of the “watchtower,” the police station, at the edge of the downtown adjacent to the highway. One participant summarized it as “they built a highway to divide us, and a watchtower to keep people out.” Some participants spoke about how children had to navigate the I-35 crossing to go to the Palm School as students. There was clear popular support for addressing the highway barrier and reconnecting the urban fabric with East Austin, and also suggestions to move the police department facility from its current location as both an act of social healing and as a way to open up opportunities for more affordable housing in the future. As a participant emphasized, “it’s important to understand what happened.”

Cultural Heritage

There was a lot of emotion expressed toward the district, tied to both its traumatic past and also to its proud heritage and what it represented to generations of citizens. The Palm School structure is the source of deep meaning and emotion to its former students and former residents of the community. As one of the few historic structures that remain, it holds a special place for both its role in the community and its perseverance. As one participant noted, “despite all the new construction, still seeing that school there and the resilience of that structure is important.” Workshop participants offered that there is “not enough balance with the authenticity and culture of the historic area that is visible to new residents and is a voice for its current and past residents.” Some felt that current development is “erasing history” given the lack of visual representation of the cultural heritage of the community. There was a lot of stated interest in public art, murals, an art museum, and activated public spaces that celebrate the cultural heritage of the Palm District. Participants offered that there should be a district-wide effort to animate the cultural heritage of the community and tell its story.

Representative Comments:

“There is a disconnect to the businesses that were approved by the City Council to buy out the families that lived on Rainey Street and the Mexican American Cultural Arts Center. The entire area should pay tribute to the local Latinos who lived there.”

“It would be cool to see murals painted on the building honoring Latino figures from the community painted by local artists.”

“Legions of small businesses were launched in East Austin as a result of the education children received at Palm School. Its legacy can’t be understated, and it should be memorialized in some way that provides a historical context for Austinites at large.”

“My father along with his siblings all attended Palm School. It represents a vital part of the history for many families who grew up in East Austin. The connection from Palm School to UJH to the old Austin High (which has been restored beautifully) is important to recognizing the reality many families faced living in East Austin. The Mexican American Cultural Center is also vital to celebrating & recognizing the history of Mexican Americans in our community. There are very few landmarks in Austin that recognize & celebrate the contributions of Mexican Americans to the Austin community.”

“This area needs to be preserved amid development that has already taken so much from the historical ties to my Mexican-American community. My dad and many relatives attended Palm School and live in East Austin from the 1940s to today.”

“My husband attended Palm School and played in Waller Creek. I’ve been gathering historic research about the Mexican and Tejano communities that used to be downtown and were forced east of East Avenue in the early 1900s for the Tejano Trails project, part of the City’s Urban Trails program.”

Perception Issues: Safety

Both survey responses and the public workshops revealed a clear desire for a new public commitment to the Palm District that addresses safety concerns and perceptions regarding cleanliness. These were cited as foundational priorities moving forward. The presence of homeless encampments in the parks and open space was also cited as a concern that needs to be addressed.

Representative Comments:

“I would like to feel safe and clean in my city”

“I live in the Palm District. I purchased a loft downtown to get out of the traffic. I enjoy walking, but in the last two years it has become unsafe to walk downtown. I am unable to enjoy the parks and trails because it has become unsafe even in daylight hours. I am constantly harassed by the homeless. It is so sad that our leaders have let this situation get so out of control.”

“Need to clean up green spaces & move unhoused campers out.”

“I would like to see the quality of Palm Park improved. Its current state of disrepair leaves it to feel scary. Especially with the homelessness challenge. Securing a solution beyond urban camps is a must to secure the safety and well being of the homeless AND not homeless.”

“Safety and cleanliness with the current homeless situation has worsened dramatically and needs to be the City’s first step to ensuring it’s a safe, welcoming place for residents and visitors.”

“The problem with homeless people is out of control. I wish the city would create more housing for them like Community First Village, so they have a safe place to live.”

“Currently do not feel safe walking anymore, also would not bring my children to the park because of needles and trash. It’s very sad.”

“The trash, the poorly maintained parks and sidewalks, and the homeless all make it hard to live here. The creek walk is one of the best things here, but it’s been abandoned to the homeless and the weeds. Planning all centers around tourists and conventions and SXSW and big events, not quality of life.”

Public Realm

There was a shared sense of unrealized potential regarding the quality of the public realm in the district. The public realm was seen as a priority that needs commitment moving forward as new development occurs and the area becomes denser. It is also seen as a key strategy to repair the historic damage and remove barriers to connecting the community. Many comments reflected the need to have a focused strategy on improving the quality of the public realm as the district moves forward and to breath fresh life into public space by activating it with art, history, culture and people.

Representative Comments:

“It’s the de facto gateway to downtown. It should be magical.”

“This area is currently poorly planned. There is too much automobile traffic and not enough walkability. The creek is currently inaccessible in most areas. Palm Park is right on the freeway and is not enjoyable to visit.”

“I would love to see the park land in this area further developed and maintained so people can make better use of it. The trail could be very nice but is currently not well taken care of.”

“I would like the Palm area to be more pedestrian friendly and less focused on cars.”

“This district should have dense housing and a wealth of transit options being downtown. Give people the option to live, work or play without needing to use their car.”

“Walkability, transit, and increased residential opportunities are the most important improvements that can be made here.”

“Palm Park could be a gem. Waterloo Park is going to be amazing. MACC is brilliant.”

“We need to activate the park as a unifier for the community.”

The Need for More Public Conversation

Finally, the Palm District has importance to the fate of the entire city and needs community involvement that reflects that fact. Several participants noted the need for the planning process to make additional efforts to engage stakeholders beyond the borders of the district as it moves forward, and to reach people on their own terms – particularly the former residents and children of the displaced that still live in East Austin and surrounding suburbs. The message was clear: the Palm District needs to tell its story, and in order to capture the authentic narrative of the place we need to reach the citizens who made it home and gave it meaning.

Representative Comments:

“History is being destroyed. It feels like nobody is listening and that is all we have left.”

“There are not enough people in the conversations. The displaced aren’t here. We need a process for involving people directly, like the former students of the Palm School.”

“I am sad to see this planning effort is physically limited to what has been historically a barrier: I-35. Sadly limited by borders defined in a resolution, this is unintentionally reinforcing the barrier and the equity issues that come along with it.”

The Big Picture



Preface

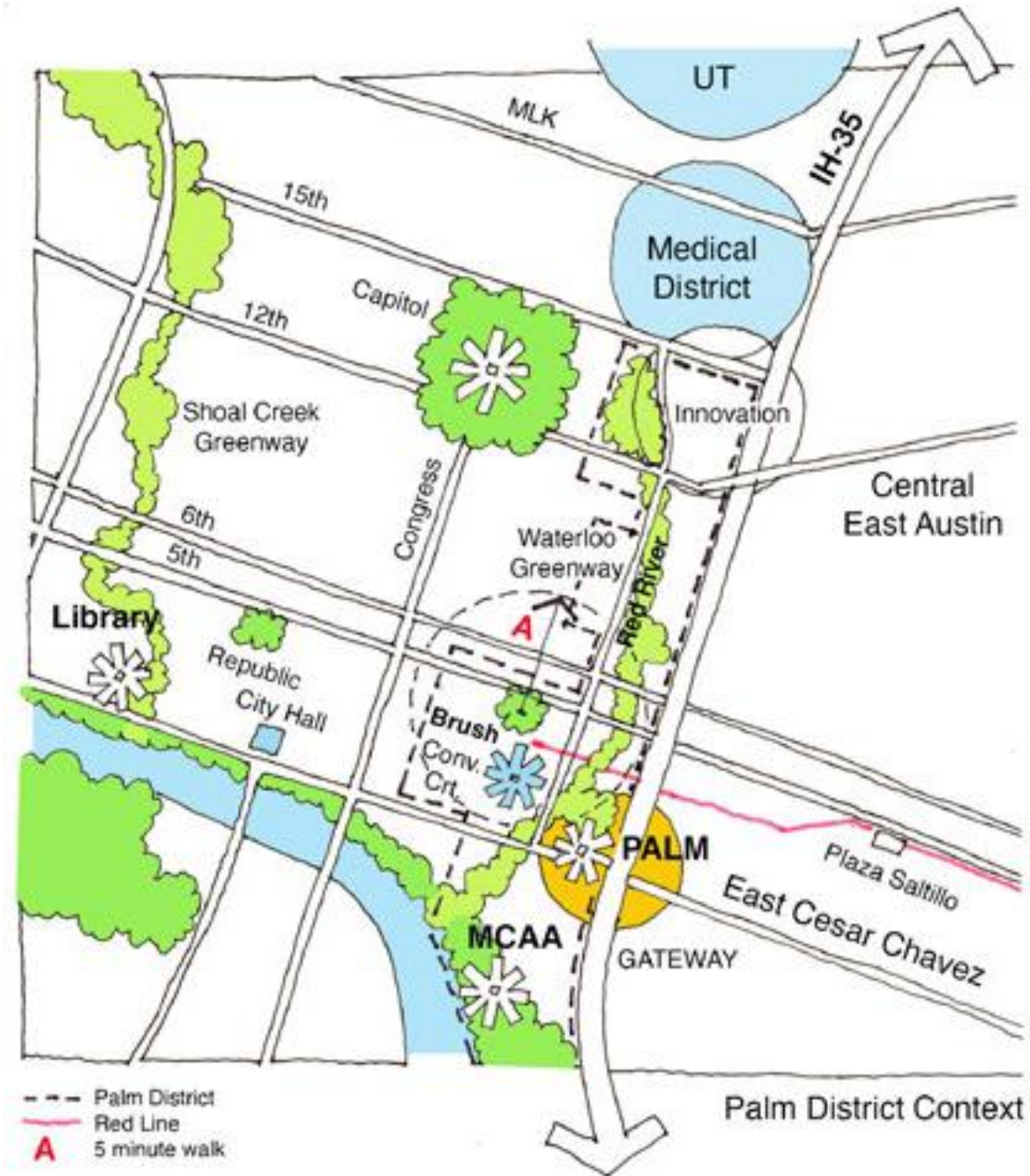
There are an incredible number of projects and initiatives going on in the newly named Palm District – in fact it's almost overwhelming! There is also intense private development activity and pressure and while it is exciting to see Austin booming – attracting new companies and employees – this development activity is **threatening the very things that make Austin Austin!**

This report offers our best recommendations for how to protect your special Austin character and also acknowledges that there are significant opportunities in the Palm District, several of them: *once-in-a-generation opportunities*.

We have identified those opportunities that can be acted upon “immediately” to demonstrate action and build momentum. In keeping with this, we made the decision to look primarily at opportunity sites/properties that are in Public Control. Those sites that would not demand property acquisition. These sites also offer the opportunity to demonstrate best practices and for the city to take leadership in meeting the needs of your citizens, particularly around affordable housing, livability, health outcomes and equity.

IH 35 is a once in a century opportunity and a cap and stitch solution would be a tremendous step in healing the cultural trauma created by the “wall” that this barrier established. We have some recommendations regarding the long-term impact when IH-35 is sunken – but our focus has been on things that can be done with IH-35 still in place.

The Waterloo Greenway is an exciting and evolving project and the momentum and potential inherent in that investment is impressive: KUDOS. It will create the eastern natural edge to downtown and echo the Shoal Creek Greenway to the West. Palm School and Park are beautifully located to anchor the Waterloo Greenway at Cesar Chavez in the same way that your impressive new library anchors Shoal Creek Greenway. Our recommendations work to build on the potential of the Greenway and the identified “jewel” sites along Waller.



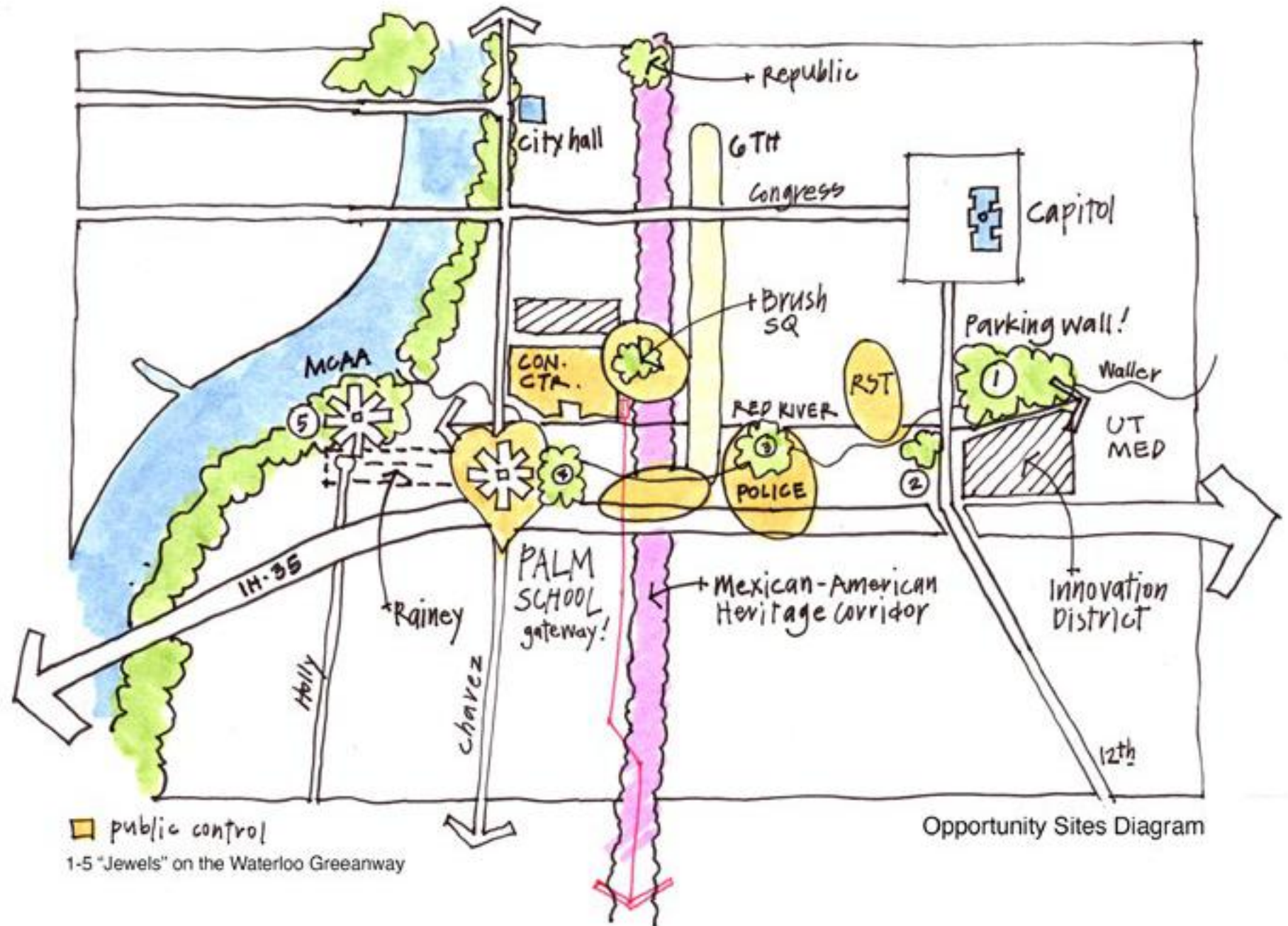
Public Sites

- The Police Department site and the Refuge
- Brush Square & city property on the Mex-American Heritage Trail at IH-35 & 5th
- The Convention Center – extroversion and mix of uses
- Palm School and Park and the Gateway to downtown at IH-35/Chavez
- Mexican American Cultural Center
- The Retirement System of Texas property

Recommendations beyond these sites include:

- Waterloo Park and best practices examples for the Innovation District
- Red River District protection and leveraging

And, throughout, we will be basing our recommendations on engagement with the themes heard in our public meetings and in the surveys and that are outlined in the Introduction: CULTURAL HERITAGE; DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY; AFFORDABLE HOUSING; SAFETY/PUBLIC REALM; MOVE TO ACTION – CONCRETE RESULTS; and THE NEED FOR PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS.



Cultural Heritage



Cultural Heritage and Historic Preservation

The Palm District is rich in culture and history—from the intergenerational family activities that took place at Palm Park years ago, to the popular Tejano music festivals that occur today at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC). Rainey Street, once home to numerous Black-owned antique shops, is today the lively Red River Cultural District that is the heart of the city’s live music culture.

The Palm District is also a place of historical trauma. Racist government policies including the city’s 1928 Master Plan and 1931 Zoning Map segregated African Americans and Mexican Americans into East Austin. By 1962, Texas erected Interstate 35 as a physical barrier between East Austin and downtown, reinforcing existing racial exclusion. The interstate cut off East Austin neighborhoods from important community spaces such as the Palm School, the historically segregated school for Mexican Americans in Austin. Urban renewal efforts of the following decade resulted in the destruction and displacement of Rainey Street’s Black-owned businesses. As early as 2005, the Austin City Council rezoned the National Register-listed Rainey Street Historic District to Central Business District (CBD) zoning, which accelerated the pace of demolition in what was formerly a Mexican American neighborhood.

Today, the historical legacy of the area’s Mexican American and African American communities remains at risk, as does the district’s live music culture. Increasing development pressure and real estate costs, along with a lack of protections for the area’s historic building stock and a high rental population, require urgent action. Community stakeholders and city leadership have expressed strong support for elevating the Palm District’s historic connections to Austin’s communities of color, sustaining the district’s live music culture, and preserving what is left of the district’s remaining architectural resources. Sample comments collected at the City’s virtual public workshop and during AIA’s public workshop illustrate these sentiments.

Sample Comments:

- “It would be cool to see murals painted on the building honoring Latino figures from the community painted by local artists. No more “anytown USA” condos that lack the personality of this city.”*
- “We need connections to the east side’s Latino and African American communities. We don’t do east-west very well. We need “fingers” in the [Palm] district.”*
- “My father along with his siblings all attended Palm School. It represents a vital part of the history for many families who grew up in East Austin. The connection from Palm School to UJH to the old Austin High (which has been restored beautifully) is important to recognizing the reality many families faced living in East Austin. The Mexican American Cultural Center is also vital to celebrating & recognizing the history of Mexican Americans in our community. There are very few landmarks in Austin that recognize & celebrate the contributions of Mexican Americans to the Austin community.”*
- “East-West connections should be part of the design [of Palm Park].”*
- “Shielding the park [Palm Park] from I-35 will be essential to more people using the space.”*

- “Park was used historically as a space for intergenerational gatherings. The pool and creek were attractions.”*
 - “Find ways to honor and preserve history of the [Palm] park.”*
 - “Only one music venue owns its own site.”*
 - “There’s no dedicated venue for Tejano/Mexican American/Spanish language music.”*
 - “Legions of small businesses were launched in East Austin as a result of the education children received at Palm School. It’s legacy can’t be understated and it should be memorialized in some way that provides a historical context for Austinites at large.”*
 - “We need to make sure what happened with Rainey Street Historic District doesn’t happen again. We were buried by the cement, high rises, and alcohol.”*
 - “There is a disconnect to the businesses that were approved by the City Council to buy out the families that lived on Rainey Street and the Mexican American Cultural Arts Center. The entire area should pay tribute to the local Latinos who lived there.”*
 - “There’s so much Mexican American history in the area that really needs to be documented and known.”*
 - “We really need stronger policy tools and models [for preserving historic character].”*
 - “East Austin is also being lost to McMansions; homes are being bulldozed.”*
 - “All this history gets lost. There’s no central reserve for it.”*
 - “We are fighting for a museum at the Palm School.”*
 - “Historic spaces need an identity; they should not become lost spaces. I hate Republic Square.”*
 - “I love how the city of Berlin partnered with the federal government, artists, and citizens to cover the city in signage, plaques, sidewalk plaques, and photos of people affected by the Holocaust to educate the public and honor those lost.”*
 - “This area of Austin has a painful history. It’s an opportunity to educate on difficult topics.”*
- ## Focus Areas
- Community and stakeholder desires relating to cultural heritage preservation in the Palm District center around five main themes. For the purposes of this project and given our limited scope, the case studies and examples presented here focus heavily on the Mexican American heritage of the area. High level recommendations are also included, however, for four additional areas: African American Heritage, Waller Creek/Waterloo Greenway, Live Music Heritage/Red River Cultural District, and Architectural and Built Heritage.

Mexican American Heritage

The southern half of the Palm District was once home to a long-standing Mexican American neighborhood that had ties to the west (Republic Square/Guadalupe Park and the earlier “Mexico” neighborhood) and to the east (East Austin). The present-day Rainey Street Historic District, within the larger Palm District planning area, was part of this Mexican neighborhood. Anchoring the southern end of the Palm District is Sir Swante Palm School and Park, the primary grade school serving Austin’s Mexican American residents for much of the 20th century. Following the construction of I-35 in 1962, Palm School students who lived in East Austin traversed dangerous traffic on a daily basis until the Palm School closed in 1976. Many Mexican American families maintain a strong cultural connection to the Palm School and wish to see it preserved and activated for community and culturally-relevant uses. Now a local historic landmark, the Palm School is perhaps the only remaining historic building associated with that period of Mexican American history within the Palm District, underscoring its significance and need for long-term preservation.

Today, several Mexican American cultural assets are present within the Palm District, including the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC), Mexic-Arte Museum, and the Viva la Vida Parade and Festival—Austin’s annual Dia de los Muertos celebration (organized by Mexic-Arte). In 2012, the National Park Service designated The Austin Tejano Trails as a National Recreation Trail. Begun as a grassroots volunteer project, organizers are working with the NPS to develop a strategic plan for its long-term sustainability. The trails include several sites within the Palm District but most are located in East Austin.

Several additional efforts are underway to document, memorialize, and sustain the Palm District’s Mexican American heritage. MACC is in the midst of a facilities expansion, Austin City Council passed a resolution

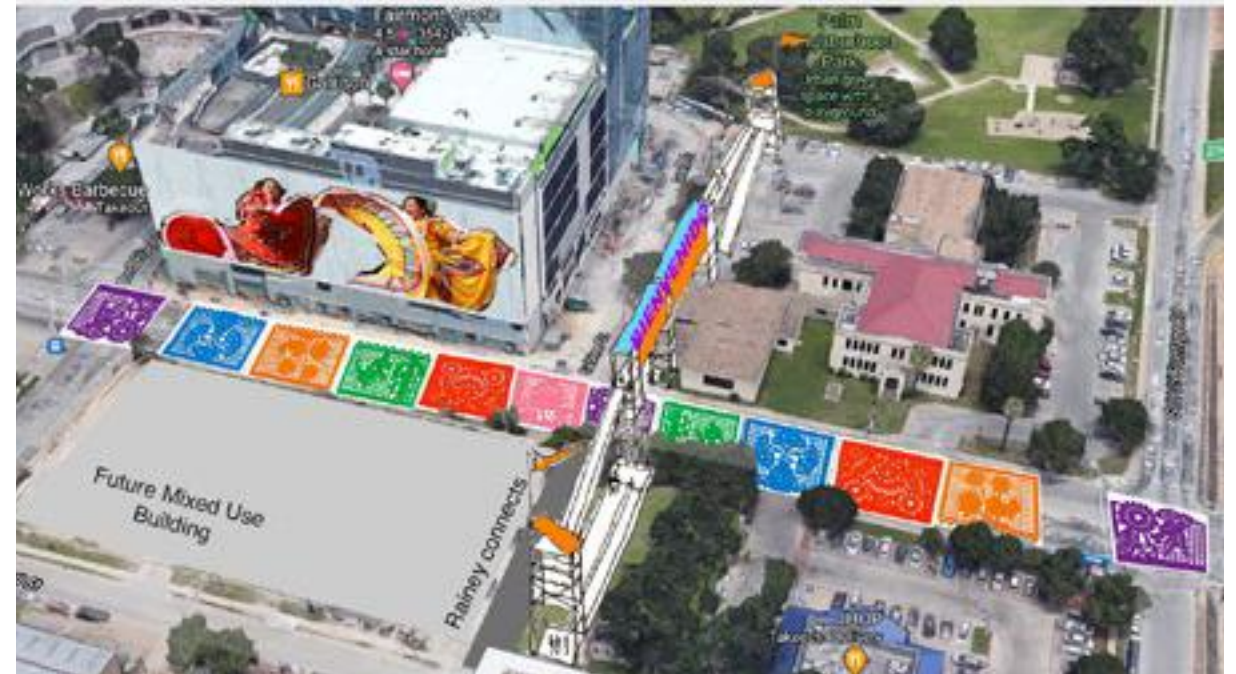
creating the 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor, and community advocates are advocating for reactivation of the historic Palm School building for public, community-oriented uses that will honor its Mexican American connections.

While the community has done a great deal to preserve and reinstate Mexican American heritage and culture in the Palm District, there are few visual cues in the public realm that educate visitors or new residents of this rich history. In addition, the historical trauma caused by segregation, displacement, and erasure persists. During stakeholder meetings, community members expressed a strong desire for more documentation, historical interpretation/storytelling, and support for Mexican American cultural activities in the Palm District.

Recommendations:

Use public art and urban design features to solidify the area’s Mexican American identity. Public art is an excellent way to interpret history in the built environment and create or reinforce a sense of place.

- **Gateway Arch:** Our first recommendation is to install a gateway arch welcoming people into the district at the intersection of Cesar Chavez and Sabine streets, where Palm School and Park is located and which serves as the main point of connectivity between downtown and East Austin. The city can commission local artist(s)/architect(s) and gather input from community members on the design, which can tie visually to the area’s Mexican American cultural history. The gateway arch could also serve as a pedestrian bridge.



- **Murals:** Mexican American culture has a strong tradition of mural painting, and murals are a common site in Latinx neighborhoods across the country. Austin has a robust public arts program as well as public funding that can be leveraged for the Palm District. While Austin has no shortage of examples to draw from, we provide examples from other cities to demonstrate how murals can help tell the story of a community’s history. Murals can celebrate a community’s heritage and also document difficult or traumatic experiences that shaped a place. The adjacent examples include traditional painted murals, tile mosaics, and rotating digital murals. Some are painted on the side of buildings while others are painted on the street, transportation infrastructure, and utility structures. Renderings show possible locations for murals within the Palm District. Other potential locations not pictured include future transit station buildings, and the Palm School building and/or annex.

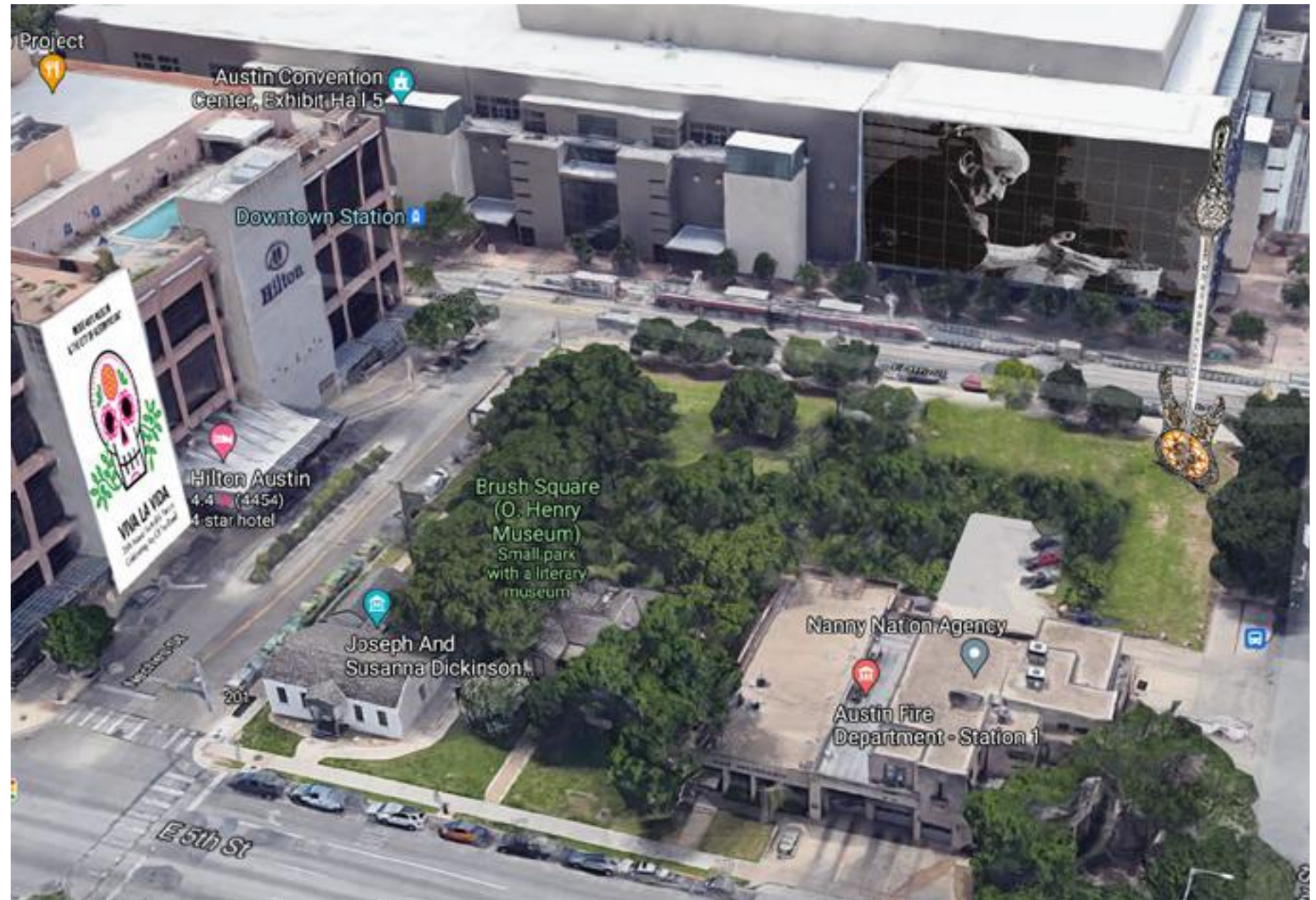


Partner with the Tejano Trails, the 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor, and other nonprofit partners to install new interpretive signage projects throughout the Palm District, especially around the Palm School and Park, MACC, and the 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor, including Republic Square and Brush Square. One recommended model is the [WeGoja Foundation of South Carolina](#), which installed historical markers and offers tours of African American historical sites, teacher’s guides, and oral history projects. Another is the [Washington D.C. African American Heritage Trail](#). Other specific recommendations:

- **Republic Square/Guadalupe Park:** Prior to white policy makers segregating Mexican Americans to East Austin, many Mexican Americans lived in the area surrounding Republic Square. It was located just west of the Palm District (and along today’s proposed 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor) and was known among Mexican Americans as “Guadalupe Park,” named after the adjacent Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. The park hosted community events including an annual Mexican Independence Day celebration. Some of the Mexican Americans of East Austin trace their family history to this older neighborhood. We recommend installing interpretive signage and public art reflecting this history in the park and reclaiming the name, “Guadalupe Park.”



- **Brush Square:** While it does not contain as strong of a connection to Mexican American heritage, Brush Square offers exciting opportunities for more inclusive historical interpretation and/or public art installations than what currently exists, particularly because the existing Fire Department has plans to vacate the premises. The Our Austin Story: Interpreting Austin's Historic Squares and Congress Avenue (Downtown Austin Alliance) identifies several historical themes that meet the goal of creating a more inclusive interpretive program. Themes include cotton yard and railroad labor, cowboy culture (which has roots in Mexican culture), and powerful women of Austin. Another possible theme to consider is the Palm District's musical heritage, with public art depicting musical instruments popular among Tejano musicians (i.e. guitar, accordion, bass) and other cultures with connections to the area. This would work particularly well if the Fire Department building and/or Brush Square are able to host musical performances in the future.



Develop and Implement the 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor. The proposed cultural corridor will run along 5th Street between Republic Square just west of the Palm District and Plaza Saltillo in East Austin. The Mexic-Arte Museum will serve as the central anchor between the two points.

At this early stage of the planning process, we recommend looking at San Francisco's Cultural District Program, which is supported by an inter-departmental steering committee including representatives of the city's housing, planning, preservation, arts, and economic and workforce development agencies. Each cultural district is overseen by a community-based advisory board as well as paid nonprofit staff person (funded by the city), and is required to produce (with city support) a "Cultural History, Housing and Economic Sustainability Strategies Report" that codifies each community's historical legacy and outlines measurable goals for each district. What is unique about San Francisco's Cultural District Program is its holistic approach and attention to community needs beyond tourism and the arts, which are indeed important but limited in what they can achieve and often do not address issues of displacement, affordability, or housing.

Preserve the Palm School and Park for community use. The Palm School building at 100 N Interstate 35 Frontage Road is a locally designated landmark owned by Travis County. The adjacent Palm Park is owned by the City of Austin. Both the city and county have held community meetings and gathered input on the future of both sites. Stakeholder voices have made clear that the Palm School and Park hold deep meaning for Mexican Americans in Austin. As the only known remaining historic building associated with the Palm District's late-19th to mid-20th century Mexican American community, and with ties to East Austin, it is imperative that the Palm School and Park be repurposed by and for Mexican Americans. This is critically important to the goal of repairing the cultural exclusion and community trauma committed against Austin's Mexican American population over the past century. Countless



models of publicly-owned, non-profit-run, multi-purpose community spaces exist. Many include gallery and exhibition space, classrooms, theaters/auditoriums, archival rooms, small business incubator space, and retail space for the sale of culturally relevant products (i.e. art, books, food, etc.) from local artists or small businesses. The Palm School building could host events in partnership with MACC, Mexic-Arte, The Tejano Trails, the 5th Street Mexican American Heritage Corridor, and/or the Convention Center. Based on community input, space for a publicly-accessible Mexican American community archive and library is also highly desired and recommended.



Protect historic and cultural assets in threatened East Austin. The Palm District and East Austin are inextricably linked. While located outside of the study area, East Austin is at risk of losing elements of its Mexican American heritage as demographic shifts and changes to the built environment are already underway. Should I-35 be lowered, as TXDOT is currently considering, it is possible that gentrification and displacement of East Austin may accelerate. Regardless of the outcome, the ongoing threats to East Austin must be acknowledged, anticipated, and mitigated. Strategies such as local historic district designation, affordable housing, community land ownership models (such as co-ops and Community Land Trusts—explained further below), community economic development initiatives, and cultural districts that come with planning protections, should all be explored.

Create a citywide, community-oriented Mexican American Heritage Tourism Program that amplifies the city’s Mexican American food and music culture, public art, cultural organizations, festivals, and history, and contributes to wealth-building among Austin’s small businesses, artists, restaurant industry workers, cultural organizations, and historic sites. Examples of heritage tourism programs that focus on food culture include Tucson’s City of Gastronomy and San Francisco’s Legacy Business Registry. Models that focus on history and heritage include Texas Time Travel—an initiative of the Texas Historical Commission—and the Washington D.C. African American Heritage Trail. The recommendations included elsewhere in this section could also be incorporated into a citywide Mexican American Heritage Tourism Program or Network.



African American Heritage

The Palm District is also associated with African American history in Austin, most notably an early Freedman community that settled in the northern part of the district, as well as a collection of Black-owned businesses concentrated along Red River Street from 6th Street to 15th Street. A working-class area, these businesses operated next to white-owned and Chinese-owned businesses. An early 1970s urban renewal project displaced many of these businesses and destroyed the buildings they were associated with, although it’s possible some still survive. Across I-35 is the Six Square District—Austin’s Black Cultural District—which honors and preserves African American heritage through arts, education, economic development, and historic preservation. The “Six Square” in its name refers to the six-square mile area in East Austin where African Americans were segregated following publication of the city’s 1928 Master Plan.

Despite the longstanding African American presence in the Palm District, there are no designated landmarks and few public monuments that memorialize that history. A recent place-making project in the Red River Cultural District did result in the creation of murals that share some of this history. An effort should be made to identify potential landmarks and storytelling opportunities to promote the legacy of the Freedmen and Black business communities that occupied the area.

During stakeholder meetings, community members expressed a desire to see more representatives of the African American community involved in Palm District planning efforts, and especially Huston-Tillotson University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in East Austin.

Recommendations:

- **Identify and preserve remaining historic resources in the Palm District associated with African American history, including the Freedman community at the northern part of the district and Black-owned businesses along Red River Street.**
- **Use interpretive/storytelling installations to elevate the African American heritage of the Palm District.**
- **Engage Huston-Tillotson University, the Sixth Square District, George Washington Carver Museum, Cultural and Genealogy Center, and others in these efforts.**

Waller Creek/Waterloo Greenway

Waller Creek is the most significant natural feature within the plan area and connects the northern and southern ends of the Palm District. The proposed Waterloo Greenway is a 1.5-mile urban trail that runs alongside the creek and will eventually connect 35 acres of green space. Currently under construction, the project is broken into three phases and is expected to be completed in 2026.

The Waterloo Greenway provides an optimal setting for storytelling and historical interpretation. In addition to educating the public about the area’s natural history and features, an interpretive program can help tell the story of the people who called this place home.



Mexican American Cowboy/Cowgirl Mural at Waterloo Park.

In community stakeholder meetings, participants expressed a desire to see more historical interpretation that honored the area’s Indigenous heritage. Numerous historic landmarks sit adjacent to the creek as well, which can be tied into a comprehensive interpretive plan. Other interpretive opportunities include storytelling or public art highlighting the former Black-owned antique businesses previously located adjacent to Waterloo Park and which were demolished during urban renewal.

Recommendations:

- **Implement an interpretive program along Waller Creek, as discussed in the Waller Creek Master Plan and in Our Austin Story: Interpreting Austin’s Historic Squares and Congress Avenue (Downtown Austin Alliance).** Include sites representative of the various racial/ethnic groups historically present in the area.
- **As suggested in the Our Austin Story report, the city should partner with the Texas Historical Commission’s Undertold Marker program to honor the presence and experience of American Indians, Mexican Americans/Tejanos, African Americans, and Asian Americans.**
- **Gather robust community input to ensure that the historical narrative presented is inclusive, equitable, and representative of the area’s history.**

Live Music Heritage/Red River Cultural District

The Palm District is the heart of Austin’s live music scene. In 2013, the city created the Red River Cultural District, which runs south along Red River Street from E. 12th Street to E. 7th Street, and east from Neches Street to I-35 Frontage Road. The Red River Cultural District

is an entertainment area containing numerous bars and clubs that serve as venues for live music (many of which are used during Austin’s South by Southwest Music Festival [SXSW]). A nonprofit formed in 2016 to help sustain and enhance the district. As noted in the Palm District Existing Conditions Report, “Market pressures, in part stemming from the removal of property from the floodplain following completion of the Waller Creek flood control tunnel, have caused this district to become increasingly fragile, and a number of iconic music venues have recently shuttered.”

Live music venues in the Palm District besides those in the Red River Cultural District include the MACC. The MACC sponsors Tejano, Latinx, and Spanish-language musical acts as part of the Mexican American Experience and Pan Americana festivals. These musical festivals are among MACC’s most well-attended events. While they occur at the same time of the SXSW festival, they are not affiliated with SXSW. Participants of the AIA community workshop noted that MACC is restricted to playing music before 9pm and that there is otherwise no dedicated space for the performance of Tejano/Latinx/Spanish-language music in the Palm District.

Recommendations:

- **Identify and designate remaining historic buildings within the Red River Cultural District as local landmarks or historic districts, which will provide a level of protection from demolition or insensitive alterations.**
- **Create a Community Land Trust (CLT) for buildings within the Red River Cultural District.** A CLT is a nonprofit entity that purchases buildings and preserves them for community uses, leasing them at affordable rates. In some cases, CLTs offer opportunities for small business/nonprofit/residential tenants to eventually purchase the property. A Red River Cultural District CLT could purchase remaining building stock that serves as

critical performance venues. One recommended model is the [Community Arts Stabilization Trust \(CAST\)](#) of San Francisco, which purchases and leases space for the exclusive use of nonprofit arts organizations.

- **Create a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for historically designated buildings within the Red River Cultural District, Palm District and throughout Downtown Austin.** (See next section for more information).
- **Foster the development of the area’s Tejano/ Latinx/Spanish-language music culture by making it easier for spaces like MACC, Palm Park and School, and the Austin Fire Department Building at Brush Square to serve as music venues.**

Architectural and Built Heritage

The Palm District contains several key historic resources including 15 locally designated landmarks and two National Register Districts—Rainey Street and the Sixth Street. Unfortunately, the National Register-listed districts have proven ineffective in preserving the historic building stock. Rainey Street, a historically Mexican American neighborhood, has been particularly impacted. Exacerbating the problem was a 2005 rezoning of the district, which incentivized the redevelopment of residential properties into commercial ones. This lack of historical preservation, particularly after community members worked hard to get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places, caused frustration and a sense of betrayal, as was expressed during stakeholder meetings.

The Sixth Street Historic District has been less impacted because it contains a higher number of individually-designated local landmarks. Austin’s local landmark designation provides the stronger protections than the National Register because the city’s review of National

Register-listed properties is advisory-only.

A lack of effective preservation protections and increasing development pressures pose ongoing threats to the historic built environment within the Palm District. Without a proactive effort to identify and preserve historic buildings in the area, they remain at risk. According to city staff, a historic resources survey of the Palm District is planned for 2022. The city is also in the process of developing an Equity Historic Preservation Plan, which will aim to increase diversity and representation of the city’s designated properties. These efforts are important and urgent.

Recommendations:

- **Complete a comprehensive historic resource survey of the Palm District to identify properties eligible for local designation or national listing.** Best practices call for historic resource surveys to be conducted alongside or as part of a planning process. A good example of this is [San Francisco’s Central SoMa Plan](#). As part of that planning effort, several local historic districts and landmarks were identified and placed on the city’s landmark designation work program at the time of the plan’s adoption.
- **Utilize Austin’s local historic designation program, which offers the strongest protections for historic buildings.** Local designation of Sixth Street and Rainey Street districts, and other identified resources in the area, is highly recommended to mitigate further erosion of historic fabric within the Palm District.
- **Create a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for locally designated properties within Downtown Austin.** TDR programs are voluntary and incentive-based programs that permit property owners to sell development rights from their land to a developer or other interested party who

then can use these rights to increase the density of development at another designated location. TDR programs can help steer development away from sensitive areas by financially compensating landowners for choosing not to develop some or all of their land. The strategy is an effective historic preservation strategy. Cities like San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York, among others, also operate successful TDR programs.

- **In keeping with the city’s effort to make its historic preservation program more equitable, survey, landmark, and financial incentive programs should give increased attention to Indigenous, Mexican American, African American, and Asian Pacific Islander American communities whose stories are underrepresented on local, state, and national historic registries.**

Public Art Credits/Attributions in this section

1. “Tucson Portrait Project” detail (2009), Darren Clark and Gary Patch, Tucson, Arizona (photo: Julie Jordan Scott/flickr)
2. “Tucson Portrait Project” 2009), Darren Clark and Gary Patch, Tucson, Arizona (photo: patchandclarkdesign.com)
3. “Lideres de la Comunidad” (2006), lead muralist Valerie Aranda, San Antonio, TX (San Anto Cultural Arts)
4. “Heaven” (2000–2001), Alma Lopez, Galería de la Raza Digital Mural Project, San Francisco, CA (photo: Galeria de la Raza)
5. “Varrio Sí, Yonkes No!” (1977, restored 1989) Raul Jose Jacquez, Alvaro Millan, Victor Ochoa, Armando Rodriguez, Chicano Park, San Diego, CA (photo: Baltimore Sun)
6. “Acero Picado” (2018), Gordon Huether, Mariposa Plaza, Fresno, CA (photo: Gordon Huether)

7. “The Rainbow Honor Walk” (2014–2019), Carlos Casuso, San Francisco, CA (photo: quirkytravelguy.com)
8. Ringold Alley marker stone, Jeffrey Miller, San Francisco, CA (photo: Jeffrey Miller/Medium.com)
9. Ringold Alley, Jeffrey Miller, San Francisco, CA (photo: Jeffrey Miller/Medium.com)
10. La Catrina Calavera, Ricardo Soltero
11. Selena Catrina, The statue was made by 40 Huichol indians using 2,000,000 beads, Menchaca Studios, San Antonio, TX (photo: Dallasnews.com)
12. “Carnaval” (1983, restored 2014), Daniel Galvez, Dan Fontes, Keith Sklar, Jaime Morgan, Eduardo Pineda and Jan Sheild, San Francisco, CA (photo: Lou Dematteis)

Real Estate Analysis



Housing Affordability and Homelessness

In a city growing as dramatically as Austin, maximizing opportunities for affordable housing is a key public priority for the Palm District. Public survey responses relayed both the need and urgency to make affordable housing a public commitment. Citizens seem willing to allow density in the Palm District if residential projects incorporate housing for a mix of income levels and contribute to public improvements through value capture mechanisms. Sample comments collected at the City’s virtual public workshop illustrate this sentiment.

Sample Comments:

“Build housing and upzone. That’s what downtown should be if this city is to stay affordable and friendly.”

“It is perverse to say you are honoring the cultural legacy of the former residents while at the same time kicking them out. Affordable housing should be the top priority, do not waste the space that is still available.”

“I believe the plan for this district can and should preserve the historically and culturally important aspects of the Palm School and Palm Park, while also making efficient use of this critical urban real estate to create more places for people to live, regardless of what their income level may be. The housing crisis in Austin demands that the city make living space for our residents a priority, and that this living space be allocated equitably across income levels.”

“I would like to see public land in this area, especially the historic Palm School property, be developed into affordable housing. This is possible without impacting the historic school. Housing people needs to be a top priority for Austin, given the unaffordability of this city and the growing number of people without homes who now camp nearby.”

“I hope this process is used to provide for many more people to have affordable options to live and work in this walkable, healthy place.”

Population and Economic Trends

A growing population is driving much of the affordability crisis. As Table 1 shows, between 2010 and 2021 the City of Austin’s population increased 24 percent, while the number of households increased 25.8 percent. However, the Palm District’s growth greatly outpaced the City, with the population increasing 92.9 percent and number of households increasing 108.8 percent, more than doubling the number of households!

Jobs by Industry

Much of this growth is driven by relocation of companies and their workers into Texas from places like Silicon Valley and New York City. According to the Wall Street Journal, the City of Austin added 9,883 new jobs in 2020 from company relocations alone.¹

¹ Konrad Putzier. “Austin Gets Boost from Covid-19,” Wall Street Journal. December 9, 2020. https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-remote-work-make-austin-a-magnet-for-new-jobs-11607423401?mod=article_inline

Table 1: Population and Households, Palm District and City of Austin, 2010-2021

Population	2010	2021	Change, 2010-2021	
			Number	Percent
Palm District	2,108	4,220	2,032	92.9%
City of Austin	800,123	992,111	191,988	24.0%

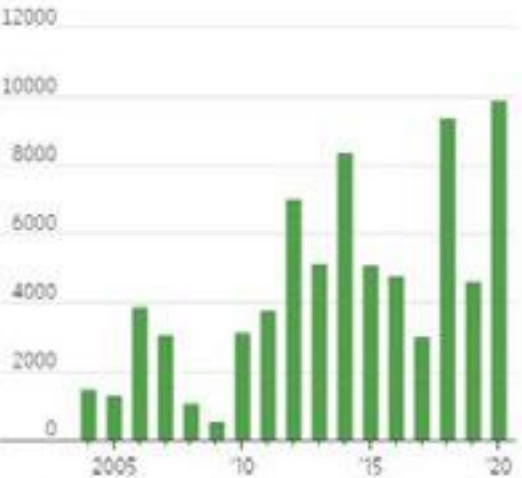
Households	2010	2021	Change, 2010-2021	
			Number	Percent
Palm District	1,302	2,719	1,417	108.8%
City of Austin	329,283	414,192	84,909	25.8%

Average Household Size	2010	2021		
Palm District	1.50	1.47		
City of Austin	2.37	2.35		

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau via Esri Business Analyst; BAE, 2021.

Go Southwest

Jobs created as a result of company relocations to Austin



Note: The 2020 number is as of November.
Source: Austin Chamber of Commerce

As Table 2 shows, not a single industry shrank in the Austin MSA between 2015 and 2020. Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities grew 58.8 percent, adding 9,700 jobs, while the Information and Financial Activities sectors each added nearly 12,000 new jobs. Professional Services gained 35,400 new jobs. While an expanding economy is great for the City and region, new housing development typically cannot keep pace with new job creation, exacerbating housing affordability issues.

Table 2: Employment by Industry, Austin MSA, 2015-2020				
Industry	2015	2020	Difference	% Change
Total Non-Farm	963,300	1,086,100	122,800	12.7%
Construction, Nat Resources, Mining	55,300	69,600	14,300	25.9%
Manufacturing	55,600	62,800	7,200	12.9%
Wholesale Trade	48,300	53,300	7,000	15.1%
Retail Trade	100,400	105,800	5,200	5.2%
Transportation, Warehousing, Utilities	16,500	26,200	9,700	58.8%
Information	27,700	39,500	11,000	42.6%
Financial Activities	54,100	66,000	11,900	22.0%
Professional and Business Services	162,600	190,000	35,400	21.0%
Educational and Health Services	111,600	129,800	18,200	16.3%
Leisure and Hospitality	115,500	134,900	19,400	16.8%
Other Services	42,700	47,200	4,500	10.5%
Government	175,200	184,700	9,500	5.4%
Sources: Austin Chamber of Commerce; BAE, 2021.				

Median Household Income

Upon seeing the recent boom in high-rise condominium development, it is unsurprising that the median annual income in the Palm District is considerably higher than citywide. In 2021, the median Palm District household had an annual income \$157,838 with nearly 73 percent of households earning \$100,000 or more. Citywide the median income was \$77,296, with 39.7 percent of households earning more than \$100,000. Thus, new development in the Palm District is catering nearly exclusively to high income households, making housing in the District unattainable for many Austin residents, including those historically connected to the area.

Table 3: Household Income, Palm District and City of Austin, 2021

Income Category	Palm District		City of Austin	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Less than \$15,000	232	8.5%	35,002	8.5%
\$15,000-\$24,999	86	3.2%	25,855	6.2%
\$25,000-\$34,999	23	0.0%	27,076	6.7%
\$35,000-\$49,999	99	3.6%	48,234	11.6%
\$50,000-\$74,999	200	7.4%	64,440	15.6%
\$75,000-\$99,999	100	3.7%	48,446	11.7%
\$100,000-\$149,999	451	16.6%	74,776	10.1%
\$150,000-\$199,999	740	27.2%	42,061	10.2%
\$200,000 or more	789	29.0%	47,494	11.5%
Total Households (a)	2,720	100.0%	414,184	100.0%
Median HH Income	\$157,838		\$77,296	
Per Capita Income	\$126,987		\$44,725	

Note:
(a) Totals may not match totals in other tables due to independent rounding.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau via Esri Business Analyst; BAE, 2021.

Residential Real Estate Market Conditions

Public comments are tapping into the reality of housing costs in the Palm District and adjacent neighborhoods. Rents and home prices in the Palm District have outpaced those in the City overall.

Rental Market Conditions

According to CoStar, a third-party data vendor, second quarter 2021 monthly rental rates in the Palm District (\$2,771 per unit) are 85 percent higher than in Austin overall (\$1,491). Figure 1 on the following page shows multifamily rent and vacancy rate trends from fourth quarter 2014 through second quarter 2021.

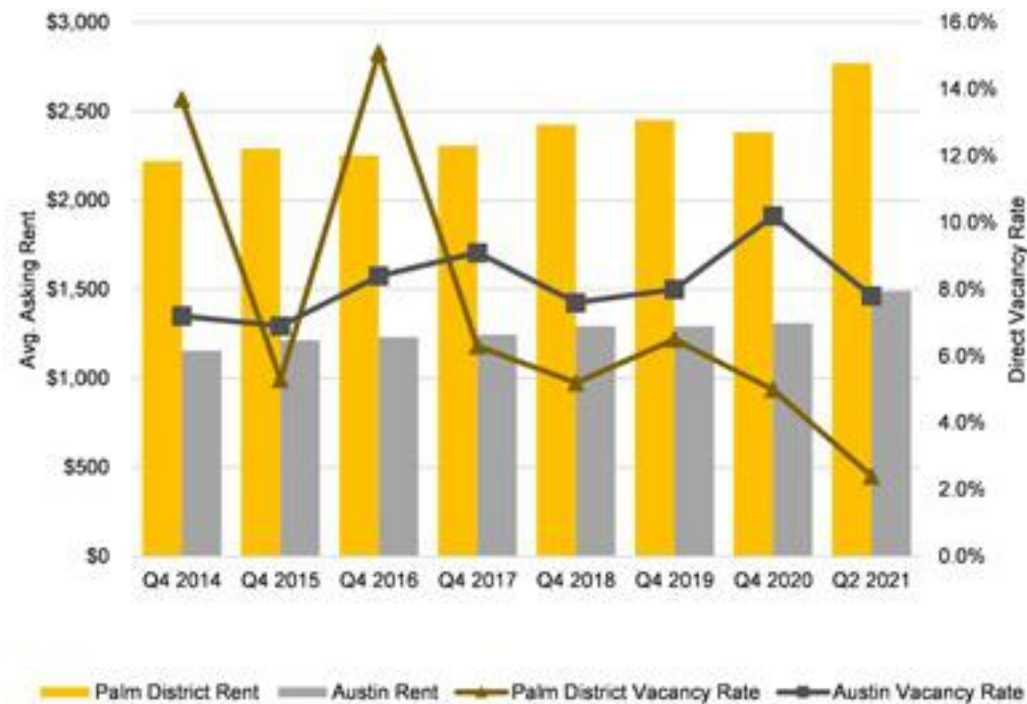


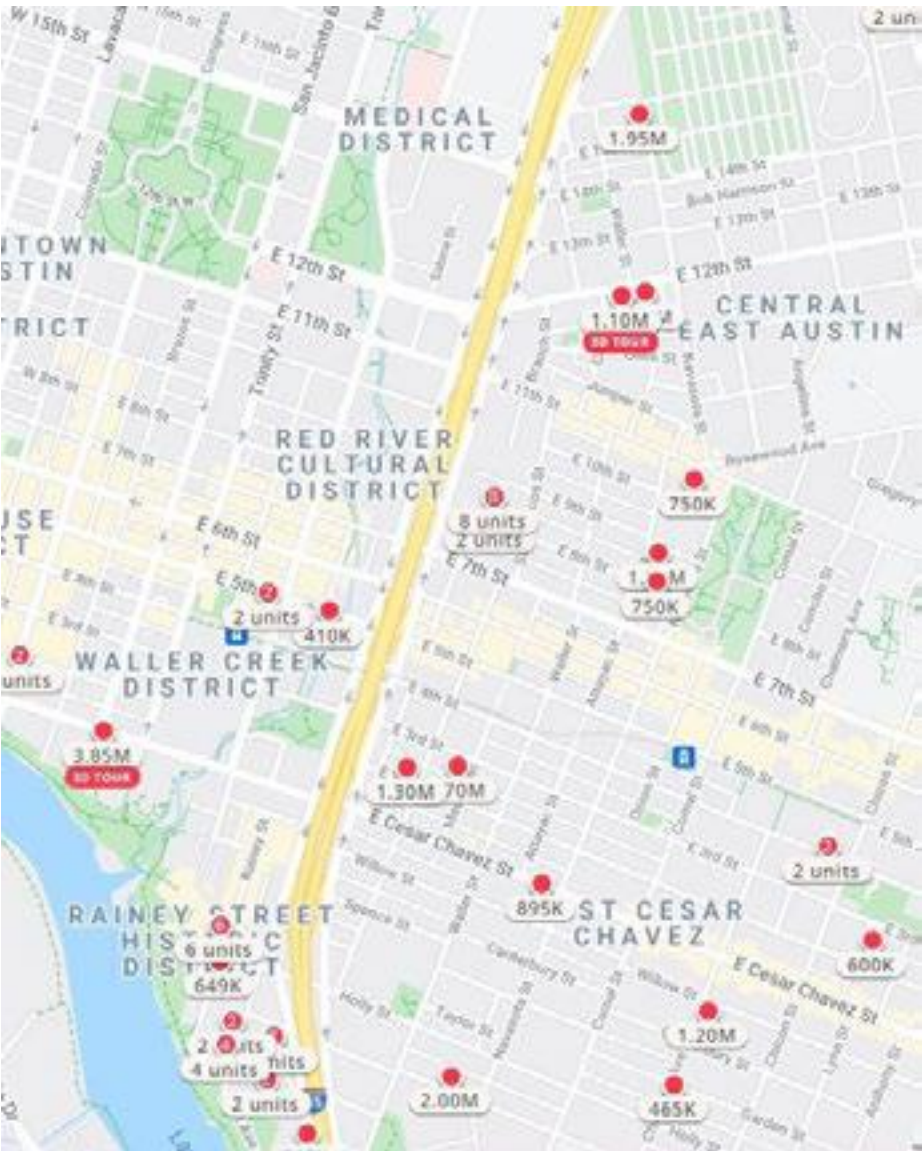
Figure 1: Multifamily Rent and Vacancy Rate Trends, Q4 2014 – Q2 2021. Sources: CoStar; BAE, 2021.

As Figure 1 shows, rents in the Palm District have been considerably higher than in the City overall for at least the past 6.5 years. Although vacancy rates were higher in the District than the City in 2014 and 2016 – likely from a significant delivery of units during these years, as of second quarter 2021, the District vacancy rate (2.4 percent) reflects an undersupplied rental market that is 5.4 percentage points lower than the City’s overall vacancy rate (7.8 percent).

For Sale Market Conditions

The for-sale housing market in the Palm District and adjacent are also becoming less affordable. According to Redfin, which tracks home sales in Austin, the median home sale price across the City set a record in June 2021, reaching \$595,000. However, in the Palm District and adjacent neighborhood east of I-35, sellers are asking for and receiving prices closer to \$1 million for single-family homes and \$500,000+ for condominium units. Figure 2 shows the available units for sale in the Palm District and adjacent neighborhood.

As demand for housing close to job centers continues to grow and outpace housing development, prices will continue to rise, exacerbating housing affordability issues.



Homelessness

Like other U.S. urban centers, Austin is experiencing a homelessness crisis. Increasing housing costs and stagnant incomes have driven many persons into homelessness. According to the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), in 2020, 2,506 people in the City of Austin were experiencing homelessness, with 1,574 unsheltered. A KXAN July 9, 2021 report on homelessness stated that city all but one city shelter was full, with more demand expected following Phase 3 of the camping ban.

The Palm District currently contains several of the homeless population. While they will likely be removed when Phase 3 of the camping ban takes effect, the larger issue of homelessness remains. Creating a clean and safe Palm District that welcomes residents and visitors alike will depend on the City, County, and State working together offer enhanced mental health services, create new shelters and permanent supportive housing, and partner with private sector NGOs and philanthropic organizations to address the causes of homelessness.

Housing Affordability

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Austin Round-Rock MSA has a 2021 Area Median Income (AMI) of \$98,900. While this is higher than many other urban areas, housing in the Palm District and surrounding areas remain unattainable to middle income households. A July 15, 2021 National Low Income Housing Coalition report on housing affordability states that a 1-bedroom rental unit would require an Austin minimum wage worker to work 129 hours per week, or 3.8 full-time jobs to afford a 2-bedroom unit. An Austin worker earning 30 percent of AMI can afford \$742 per month in rent, while a median income household can afford a rent of \$1,336 per month.² Per Figure 1, the average rental rate in Austin is \$1,491 and \$2,771 in the Palm District.

Affordable Housing/Homelessness Strategies

Following are potential affordable housing and homelessness strategies that the City should employ, as available, to address housing issues in the Palm District and beyond.

Affordable Housing Strategies

- Create a local funding source for affordable housing using Development Impact Fees charged to new commercial and market rate residential
- Create a Community Land Trust to ensure long-term affordability of housing projects and subsidize land costs for affordable housing developers
- Set Annual Affordable Housing Production goals, which can be adopted as a non-binding city policy, but allow the City to track housing development relative to its stated goal

² <https://reports.nlihc.org/oor/texas>

- Phase out or raise Density Bonus In-Lieu Fees to incentivize unit production
- Preserve existing affordable housing units
- Measure outcomes annually through an up-to-date inventory of affordable units and their sunset dates

Homelessness Strategies

- Fund and implement the 2018 Austin Action Plan to End Homelessness
- Partner with shelter developers to choose locations close to emergency mental health hospitals so that people have somewhere to go when they leave the emergency room
- Follow national guidelines and best practices for ending chronic homelessness
- Conduct an annual assessment of the previous year to measure the efficacy of strategies

Opportunities for Equitable Development (TOD)

The Palm District will contain a transit node where the Red, Green, Gold, and Expo lines will meet adjacent to the convention center. This presents an opportunity for equitable development either adjacent to transit, as available, and on publicly owned and controlled sites. Proximity to downtown, restaurants, and transit are desirable amenities that drive real estate values higher. While affordable housing developers are often unable to compete with market-rate developers for land proximate to transit, public agencies such as the City of Austin, Austin Transit Partnership/ Capital Metro, Travis County, and the State of Texas should contribute available and appropriate sites for affordable housing, economic development incubator space, or other uses that contribute to community benefits.

Opportunity Sites

The preceding map illustrates that the District will be richly served by transit and that there are severally publicly owned or controlled sites that provide opportunities for the City to leverage in order to facilitate affordable housing or economic development goals.



Figure 3: Palm District Transit and Opportunity Sites.

Police Station

The existing police station sits on more than three acres located at 715 E 8th Street, along the I-35 Frontage Road between 7th and 8th Streets. Because the City owns this site, it can control future uses, prioritizing affordable housing or a mixed-income project can both provide affordable units and create a long-term revenue stream to the City through a ground lease. The site could also include economic development uses, like a small business incubator, leveraging its proximity to the innovation district and affordable housing.

Because the City is the site’s owner, it can require that interested developers provide onsite inclusionary housing units or other prioritized community benefits. Rather than making this requirement as the regulatory agency, which the State of Texas does not permit, the City can make this requirement as the property owner laying out its minimum deal terms for a ground lease or other form of conveyance. However, as community benefits are often expensive, the City should gather its internal stakeholders now to list the priorities and desires, and then evaluate the feasibility of development with and without community benefits so that it has this information ready when it’s time to start a developer solicitation process. As previously mentioned, community benefits could include permanent supportive housing (due to proximity to ARCH and advocates), affordable housing, economic development uses, demolition of existing police station, and/or financial contributions to infrastructure improvements.

While any affordable housing component should be located on portions of the site located farthest from the freeway to promote equitable health outcomes, located three blocks from the Red and Green lines, this site provides possibly the best opportunity for affordable housing in the District.

Recommendation: Assemble key City stakeholders, prioritize public benefit uses for this site, develop a timeline for relocating the Police functions, begin testing feasibility of redevelopment as relocation of the police function approaches.

Fire Station 1

Fire Station 1, located at 401 E 5th Street, represents another key opportunity site for the City to leverage its assets to promote economic development goals. As an historic site, Fire Station 1 should not be redeveloped. However, given its proximity to the Convention Center and the Red River Cultural District, it could be reused as a music venue, and opened up to Brush Square for larger events.

Many of the Red River music venues are in danger of displacement due to rising land values and rental rates. Fire Station 1 provide the City with an opportunity to create a music venue that is “safe” from gentrification and displacement. The City can procure a developer and operator through a request for proposals (RFP), asking potential operators to propose programming that supports developing talent, like opening the venue occasionally for cultural events or community meetings. The City should not expect to monetize this site, but to use it to promote the long-term viability of the area as a music district.

During interviews, City staff noted that the long-term plan is to relocate the fire function from Fire Station 1 and that this station is the busiest in the City. Relocation of the fire function should only occur to improve response times. If the City does not know where the functions will go, and given the incredible growth occurring in Austin, the City should conduct a Fire and/or Public Safety (including Police) Facilities Master Plan that identifies where services are needed to enhance response times throughout the District and the City.

Recommendations: Identify timeline to relocate fire function and evaluate need for public facilities master plan; begin speaking with music NGOs about logistics and feasibility of reuse as a music venue; consider letting the new Economic Development Corporation lead this initiative, process, and procurement.



Photo of Teachers Village in Newark, NJ.



Fire Station 1, Austin, TX

Gravel Yard

The Gravel Yard site is a one-acre site located at 436 Interstate 35 Frontage Road that operates as a parking lot. Because the site is located adjacent to the freeway, affordable housing may not be an optimal use at this time. If the City chooses to hold the site for development until the I-35 freeway capping project is underway, health outcomes would be different, and the site would be appropriate for affordable housing. Given its adjacency to the Red and Green lines, this site would have tremendous potential for a transit-oriented development.

This site may also be appropriate for relocating the fire functions from Fire Station 1. Having a front door to the fire station on the greenbelt could act as a destination for kids and families. Located just three blocks from Fire Station 1, this site would likely provide the Fire Department with similar response times. While being located on a block surrounded by one-way streets may not be an optimal location for a fire station, it would mirror existing conditions.

Recommendations: Evaluate site potential for new fire station.

Convention Center

To the extent that any site assembly has occurred for the Convention Center Expansion that will not be needed, the City should consider developing mixed-use affordable housing on those sites. In addition, there may be an opportunity to include affordable housing uses as part of the convention center redevelopment, itself. The Austin Convention Center Department is getting ready to procure architectural services to design the new convention center. As part of this effort, the Department can request that the architect show a version with housing above the convention center and evaluate the additional costs.

The State of Washington recently redeveloped its own Convention Center in Seattle and is allowing co-development of two towers (one office, one residential) to be located atop the convention uses. The Convention Center provided the entitlements and 70 percent construction documents, and are now soliciting developers to build the private development uses.

Recommendations: Evaluate physical potential for housing as part of the convention center expansion; engage affordable housing developers and operators to determine their interest in this opportunity and understand financing potential for the affordable housing component; contact Washington Convention Center to learn about their process and lessons learned.

Teacher Retirement System of Texas Building

The Teacher Retirement System of Texas Building, which sits on roughly six acres and is located at 1000 Red River Street, presents a more challenging opportunity for the City. Although the site is located along the planned Gold line and represents an opportunity for equitable TOD and a mixed-income housing district, it is owned by the State of Texas and is surrounded by other state and institutional uses.

Institutional districts are typically deserted areas on weekends and after 5:00 pm, when offices are closed. Most civic and state centers have this characteristic where they are only active for eight hours per day. Market rate housing that can support some retail in the project is the best use for extending the hours of the area, turning it from an eight-hour district into an 18-hour district. Affordable housing and workforce housing can be a part of the project to create a mixed-income district. Smaller scale development with multiple buildings that reconnect the street grid, rather than a single building will also help activate the area.

Recommendation: Engage the State to learn about its plans for the site and evaluate the potential to influence redevelopment as a key stakeholder.



Newly expanded Washington Convention Center with Housing.



Burlingame, CA mixed income district on 6.42 acre site.

Opportunity Site Development/Disposition Best Practices

The disposition process is important to optimizing the disposition and development of sites. Cities historically have sold or given away land to developers, liquidating an asset that cannot be replaced. Recently, the City of Austin released a developer solicitation the meets the best practices outlined below. The City should continue to use these best practices for development and disposition of its sites in the Palm District.

Disposition Process

For those sites that the City owns or controls, it can establish goals for each site (e.g., economic development uses, affordable housing, monetize assets) and then specify requirements in development solicitations to obtain proposals that best meet specific site goals and requirements.

Public agencies, like any private owner of land, have several options to monetize their land asset values, including: (i) direct development for their own account; (ii) sale of their fee interest, (iii) contribution of land to a joint venture as an equity stake; or (iv) ground lease to a private developer. Each option can be appropriate depending on the revenue needs and risk tolerance of the owner as well as the degree to which an owner desires long-term control over their property. As a matter of practice, public agencies most often utilize either a sale or ground lease monetization approach and less frequently pursue direct development or joint ventures. In many cases, a single public agency will utilize both a sales and ground leasing approach, depending on the characteristics of the property and the revenue needs of the agency at the time it makes an asset management or disposition decision.

Whenever possible, ground lease sites to developers to create long-term revenue streams. In disposing of sites that can only be used for a for-sale housing

development, sell the property. Commercial properties or properties with multifamily housing potential should be disposed of through a long-term developer ground lease in order to create a long-term revenue stream for the City. Affordable housing and/or economic development sites should be disposed of through a ground lease with the City writing down some or all of the value as its contribution to the project. These steps can be used to guide development on opportunity sites identified in the future, as well.

- 1. Establish and prioritize development goals** – The City should begin the disposition process by establishing and prioritizing goals for a given site. The can include activating the area, monetization, providing affordable housing or other community benefit use(s), demolition of existing improvements, and/or any other goals that the City would like to realize on its property.
- 2. Perform site due diligence** – understanding the site conditions, including any environmental conditions, easements, or other factors that can affect the development potential of a given site should be identified. The more information the City can give the development community, the better the quality of developer proposals.
- 3. Determine the best approach for disposition that meets the City’s needs based on project goals and City needs** – Because a fee sale and ground lease can produce significantly different financial results for the land-owner, the City should conduct a financial and risk evaluation to determine which disposition should be used for a given site.
- 4. Conduct financial analysis of proposed projects to understand whether developers will be interested in the opportunity and estimate revenue potential** – The City should conduct pro forma financial feasibility testing to evaluate potential development profits and ground lease or sale revenues from site disposition for projects that meet the City’s stated goals.

Furthermore, the financial results obtained from a ground lease can vary depending on how rent terms are structured. Thus, the City should conduct financial testing to determine its optimal strategy and allow the City to solicit development proposals and enter subsequent negotiations from an informed position.

- 5. Conduct market sounding** – Once the City understands the type of project it wants for a site, it should meet with the development community to begin marketing the project. This will allow the City to hear any concerns from the development community and get a sense of their levels of interest. Having this information allows the City to make any necessary adjustments needed to enhance developer interest and/or determine the best timing for releasing a developer solicitation.
- 6. Establish project criteria and draft developer RFQ/P** – The City will need to establish clear criteria for scoring developer project proposals. Developers will respond to maximize points, so criteria should track closely to the City’s desired outcomes. Anything the City requires from the project should be clearly stated in the RFQ/P, including prior experience of development firms and project managers, as well as dispositions structures and outcomes. Other desired outcomes should be clearly articulated and assigned points.
- 7. Issue RFP, score developer proposals and enter into exclusive negotiations** – The City should then issue an RFP to developers, score submittals based on well-established criteria, interview development teams and ask for clarifications (if necessary) and select a preferred developer. Upon selection, the City should be prepared to enter into an Exclusive Negotiation Agreement (ENA) with the preferred developer. The ENA should include milestones for project due diligence with off-ramps for the City and developer if either party fails to perform. The City and developer should use the ENA period to negotiate deal terms and sign a Terms Sheet that specifies the roles,

responsibilities, expectations, ground lease (or other) payments associated with the project.

Responsible Agency

In October of 2020, City Council authorized the creation of the Austin Economic Development Corporation (Corporation). Among its responsibilities, the Corporation is charged with “acting on behalf of the City for the (i) development, construction, acquisition, ownership and operation of community development projects; (ii) promotion, development, encouragement and maintenance of employment, commerce and economic development in the City; (iii) promotion, development, construction, acquisition, ownership and operation of affordable housing projects; (iv) promotion, development, encouragement and maintenance of for profit and not-for-profit creative and cultural venues within the City...”

We recommend empowering the Corporation to lead development disposition efforts, funding the Corporation, and staffing the Corporation with employees who have experience delivering affordable housing, private development, and public-private partnerships on behalf of public agencies. The experience of the Corporation’s staff will be critical in achieving desired outcomes.

Strategic Considerations



Austin is a booming area, one of the fastest-growing in the United States. Nowhere is the pressure of future development more evident than in the Palm District. The City of Austin has responded to—and in some cases, anticipated—the pressure by producing myriad plans, examining almost every aspect of the area’s geography. Today at least 10 once-in-a-generation (or once-in-a-lifetime) initiatives currently are under way or contemplated in this compact area of Downtown. But these are the sorts of initiatives that make for a world-class Downtown. Austin, even with all of its assets, cannot be a world-class city without having a world-class Downtown—one where people want to live, work, enjoy, and explore.

Six more of the current initiatives follow:

1. Innovation District. At the northern end of the district, the City has identified a Capital City Innovation District in partnership with Ascension Seton, Central Health, and the University of Texas at Austin. Such anchor districts <https://anchordistrictcouncil.org/> often flourish around hospitals, universities, and museums. The creation of the Innovation District is a promising gesture, not only to ensure that the area remains clean, safe, and friendly, but also to encourage collaboration among the parties on more strategic issues. Austin can learn from health- and innovation-related anchor districts throughout America, among them:

- Houston’s Texas Medical Center <https://www.tmc.edu/>
- Boston’s MASCO (Medical Academic and Scientific Community Organization) <https://www.masco.org/>
- Cleveland’s Health-Tech Corridor <https://www.tmc.edu/>
- Buffalo’s Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus <https://bnmc.org/>

As the Innovation District progresses, there are a wide range of topics that can be addressed by the organization, including:

- Clean/safe/friendly, Business Improvement District-like programs
- Special events
- Healthy-community initiatives
- Planning and real-estate initiatives
- Workforce development
- Innovation and entrepreneurship programs

As health care is an evolving and growing industry, the Innovation District and its primary members are likely to be a voracious consumer of commercial space, thus endangering the character of the Red River Cultural District to the south and the residential East End to the east side of the current IH-35, unless appropriate planning is done.

2. Red River Cultural District. The Red River Cultural District is, as the website proclaims, a “world-wide cultural tourism destination for authentic live music, food, and drink experiences in Downtown Austin.” For how long it will be such a destination is problematic. Plans have warned repeatedly that the Red River Cultural District is endangered by development pressures coming from the north (Innovation District), west (Texas State Capitol), and southwest (traditional Downtown) in fast-growing Austin.

A lack of concerted action to protect the district will mean that the funky one- and two-story structures of the district will inexorably be replaced by denser office and residential development, as has happened through much of Downtown. Just as the residential bungalows of the Rainey Street District may be replaced by office buildings—including Texas’ tallest skyscraper—so will the structures of the district. From a purely economic

standpoint, the land is too valuable to support such modest structures; from a more holistic standpoint, Austin is not Austin without a vital Red River Cultural District.

The district currently is somewhat protected by Texas State Capitol view corridors, designed to protect the Capitol dome from obstruction by high-rise buildings. In 2013, Austin City Council designated the 600-900 blocks of Red River Street as the Red River Cultural District. In 2016, the Red River Cultural District Merchants’ Association was formed, with boundaries stretching from the 600 block to the 1200 block of Red River Street, including some short stretches of perpendicular streets. The main function of the Merchants’ Association is to

In 2020, the Texas Commission on the Arts identified the district as one of five state-sanctioned cultural districts throughout the state, but the designation does not protect its structures.

We would recommend adopting as a high priority the mission of identifying ways of protecting the structures of the Red River Cultural District. Such tools might include:

- Strengthening of current restrictions
- Local historic designation
- National historic designation
- Transfer of development rights (TDR)
- Community land trust <https://cast-sf.org/>

3. Waterloo Greenway. The Waterloo Greenway is a Herculean task. The greenway has the potential to be the defining feature of the Palm District—the spine that defines not only the Palm District, but Downtown and the City of Austin. The planning of the Waterloo Greenway has been thoughtful and intense. The grand opening of the 11-acre Waterloo Park is a major



Innovation district.



Red River Cultural District.

achievement toward the realization of the Greenway and will provide momentum toward the next phases of the project.

While Austinites understandably shy away from the Waterloo Greenway being compared to the San Antonio Riverwalk

Three observations regarding the Waterloo Greenway:

- Ensuring that abutting properties relate to the Greenway in an appropriate way—and make optimal use of it—is a challenge almost equal to that of building the Greenway.
- As such, the Conservancy will need to be opportunistically responsive to the planning and building of abutting properties, often entering into negotiations regarding development. We understand that design guidelines have been promulgated for abutting properties. When a community has a history of turning its back to the water, it is often challenging to get people to “turn themselves” around. Whether and how these guidelines can be enforced will be a top agenda item for the Conservancy.
- The Conservancy is on the cusp of moving much more heavily into a mode of maintaining and programming the Greenway. Greenspaces, especially urban parks, can be expensive to operate.

4. Convention Center redevelopment. The plans to expand and renovate the Austin Convention Center promise to add another jewel to the Palm District. The Convention Center was built in 1992 and expanded in 2002. While serving the community well, it suffers from a design that deadens interactivity with the rest of the Palm District: blank walls, single entrance, creation of “superblocks.”

The panel is encouraged to hear that the Convention Center leadership is seeking to remedy these design problems, while at the same time creating a Convention

Center that will bring Austin into the future for convention facilities. Much as the Central Library was designed with the flexibility to serve Austin for the next 100 years, so, too, should the Convention Center be designed with the same intent.

We recommend that the Convention Center leadership, when planning the new facility, convene an advisory committee of constituents from the Palm District to ensure that interactivity with its neighbors be one of the priorities of Convention Center design. In addition, construction of the new facility will cause major disruption in the functioning of the Palm District neighborhood, which will require significant coordination with the stakeholders.

5. IH-35 replacement. Austin promises to join the growing list of cities—Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, Milwaukee—replacing interstate highways in their central cities with street types more appropriate for their urban settings. In the case of Austin, that means, on the eastern edge of the Palm District, the Cap and Stitch project, replacing IH-35 with a version of the historic East Avenue, which was obliterated by the interstate in 1962.

The Cap and Stitch project promises to be an initiative that will take several decades to complete and involve serious negotiations at all levels of government, most notably the Texas Department of Transportation.

As has happened in the other cities, IH-35 replacement will breathe new life into the City. The interstate served to divide a community into east and west of IH-35, while delivering adverse environmental impact—air pollution, noise,

At the same time, IH-35 replacement is likely to result in a “Wild West” of real-estate speculation, as development pressures from the west push into East Austin. Such development likely will result in the displacement and loss of neighborhood character, unless strategies are put in place now.



Waterloo Greenway.



Convention Center.



IH-35 Cap and Stitch.

We suggest a panel in the near future dedicated to questions planning, design, development, and regulation along the IH-35 replacement.

6. MACC addition and Red River Street extension. We support the proposed addition onto the Mexican American Cultural Center as a valuable asset to the district. The MACC not only commemorates the critical role that Mexicans played in the development of the City, but also celebrates the community’s current presence. The MACC also provides a key anchor in the Rainey Street District, a place that, through lack of protection, has lost much of its character.

There have been early investigations of continuing the north-south street spine of the district, Red River Street, south of Cesar Chavez, to create a street connection through to Holly Street. This, it seems, will require running the new street frontage through the parking lot of the MACC. While this extension would connect the street grid for improved vehicular and pedestrian circulation in the area it should only be advanced after in-depth discussions with all stakeholders in the Mexican American community.

Too many previous decisions appeared to “take from” the Mexican American community and this could be seen as “one more taking.” One reason the MACC might support the extension of Red River Street is that it would certainly increase the MACC’s visibility and make it easier to find and guide visitors to this important and impressive Austin asset. Any extension of Red River should also prioritize the pedestrian experience over the vehicular.

All told, the Austin community has identified up to a dozen major initiatives—some redevelopment, some protection, some both—that have moved or are about to move from the planning phase to implementation. Leading and managing these initiatives—all in a compact area, all at the same time, each initiative affecting the other—is daunting drains the community’s resources, both human and monetary. Planning is easy. Doing is hard.

Austin’s new Central Library, opened in 2017, is “designed to be flexible enough to serve our community for the next hundred years.” The library is heralded nationwide as a prime example of a 21st-century urban library. Other cities look to Austin to see how to create a Central Library. The planning and implementation of the library depended upon a major community undertaking, directed by an organization with:

- A strong governing body
- A wise staff
- Experienced consultants
- Adequate financial resources
- A commitment to involve the community

Austin must ensure that each of the multiple Palm District initiatives are undertaken as purposefully as was the Central Library. And they need to be coordinated with one another just as purposefully, as one initiative affects each of the others, perhaps by convening a Palm District Steering Committee.

The City should examine a number of concepts to help fund these major community improvements. of value capture <https://www.lincolnst.edu/key-issues/value-capture-property-tax> , i.e., public financing that acquires some of the value that public infrastructure generates for private property owners. All of the major public-infrastructure projects we have cited--the Waterloo Greenway and the I-35 Cap and Stitch project in particular—should have a major positive influence on the private properties surrounding them in Downtown Austin. It is only fitting and property that a portion of those increased values should go to help pay for these and future public infrastructure projects, where through:

1. Tax-increment financing districts
2. Business improvement districts
3. Flood-control districts
4. “Percentage for the arts” legislation
5. General legislation sharing increased property-tax revenues for the Palm District area.



Central Library.

In addition to value capture, we strongly suggest that the city government, in the grand Texas tradition, lean heavily on the private sector and local foundations to help fund these major initiatives. The Mayor and the City Manager should reach out to the Austin Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Austin Alliance and their members to be called upon to serve, as should the Austin Community Foundation, the Dell Foundation, the Musk Foundation, and other major foundations. There are so many projects that need to be tackled in the Palm District, that there most likely will be at least one project that appeals to every potential funding source.

Similarly, the City needs to identify major infrastructure projects that can be funded by the newly identified federal infrastructure funding.

Finally, the City must be precise and consistent about what to call what we have been referring to as the Palm District. The name emanates from the Palm School, originally called Tenth Ward School, renamed after Sir Swante Palm in 1902. The school is of historic importance to Austin and, particularly, to the Mexican American community, as many were educated at the school during the City's formative years.

The entire district—from the Innovation District at the north to the Rainey Street District at the south—are not necessarily served well by the Palm District moniker. Yet the area does have a certain cachet; it is differentiated from other areas of Downtown, both as it currently exists and as it is planned to be.

- First, the district is meant to be livable and walkable.
- Second, it is rich in Mexican American heritage.
- Third, the district is a focus of Austin-area culture and entertainment.
- Fourth, it is the portion of the dense, urban Downtown that is connected to nature and health, especially through the Waterloo Greenway, LBJ Lake, and the Innovation District.

Now What?



A Call to Action

It doesn't require any special expertise to know that the citizens of Austin have experienced a lot of adversity in the past year. The combined impacts of the pandemic and Winter Storm Uri created severe conditions that tested the community's resilience and illustrated the burdens that our most vulnerable families bear. Many communities were feeling strains prior to the pandemic and the events of the past year have certainly created added difficulty. Now, as the speed of post-pandemic growth and development begins to accelerate dramatically again, it would not be surprising if some residents felt a real sense of despair over the potential fate of their communities. The struggle is real.

“History never gets old.
Time is time was NOW.”

– Elysium Mural by Michael
Corcoran and Tim Kerr

The pace of change in Austin is dramatic, and without concerted efforts from all sectors of the community, treasured cultural assets, community traditions and the places that have defined what it means to be uniquely Austin could vanish. Our team may have been hundreds of miles away during this virtual process, but we could hear – and feel – the visceral anxiety in your community about the future. Citizens of Austin, our team heard you loud and clear. Now, we hope you will hear our message to you as well.

This is a pivotal, defining moment for the city. The Palm District can develop into a glorious demonstration of what it means to be an Austinite, or another cautionary tale about what could have been.

The team heard time and again about the historic opportunities present in the Palm District. This report identifies a number of them, describing them as “once in a generation,” transformative opportunities. But these are only opportunities if they are seized, and that requires consistent and collective action in the public interest. It is important to consider not just what lays before you, but what you stand to lose if you do not act. Without concerted action that involves every sector of your community, we believe it is a foregone conclusion that lasting damage will occur to the historic fabric and heritage of the Palm District as well as its capacity for future innovation. Great places don't just happen – they are created, maintained, and protected. Take a moment to consider your city. It's not just a place where leading tech companies want to be now, it's *where many of them were born*. The conditions that create that innovative environment are special.

The community's cultural ecosystem produced Austin's unique style. In what other city can you have both world-class barbecue and a body-positive pageant for pet pigs? Even for a group of outsiders like our team, such realities trigger the “only in Austin” refrain, a point that elicits no small amount of civic pride locally – *and it should*. It is time to bring back the iconic rallying cry of Red Wassenich: Keep Austin Weird!

To mismanage the growth and development of this area now would represent a form of cultural homicide. And it certainly wouldn't be the first time it happened here. From an urban planning perspective, the history of the Palm District can only be described as notorious. Like

other American cities, it is known for its treachery. The narrative of displacement and segregation is well-worn at this point, ingrained in the very fabric of the area. No citizen of East Austin could be faulted for expressing a healthy dose of skepticism toward urban planning today. One is left to imagine what the cultural significance of the Palm would be today if generations of contributors hadn't been forcibly displaced by the planning policies of the day. Instead, areas like Six Square have developed cultural legacies that many other cities would dream to have. Consider the contributions that a place like Victory Grill would have added to the Palm, with the likes of Tina Turner, Etta James, Billie Holliday, and B.B. King that performed there. Imagine if Palm Park had been as inclusive as Rosewood Park to Austinites. Of course, this history cannot be undone, and it caused irreparable harm. However, today's growth may well be presenting you with the greatest opportunity of all – the chance to bring a cultural renaissance home again.

Long before it became known as a high-tech boom town, Austin was defined by culture and creativity, and the Palm District has played an outsized role in that cultural production. The Palm's history is defined by local people seizing opportunities. This is where Simon Sidle, a son of freed slaves, established Antique Row. It's where Sam Lung opened Austin's first Chinese restaurant in 1946. These are the streets where Tejanos first helped popularize Tex-Mex cuisine. That cultural movement went from the kitchens of Tejano women who lived around Guadalupe Square to the development of companies like Walker's Austex Chile Co. selling products nationwide, and today Tex-Mex is a globally celebrated culinary tradition with expressions all over the world. *It happened here, in the Palm.*

It is not cliché to describe the Palm District as special. Think about it. The Palm has the unique ability to produce both Hells Half Acre and a Groovers Paradise. The area has epitomized an inclusive ethos despite formal attempts to wipe it out. The Palm has drawn everyone from hippies to homeless. It has a collection

of dive bars, drag bars, punk bars and skater bars, and they are all notable. These bars have all contributed to the “Austin weird.” In fact, they have served as a cultural launchpad. This is where the 13th Floor Elevators inaugurated psychedelic rock, where greats like Janis Joplin, The Vaughan brothers, Marcia Ball, and Jimmie Gilmore played. It is where legendary musicians *still play*. These are the kind of places that have created such a raging music scene that it earned Austin the title of “World Capital of Live Music.” The Palm District contains not just pieces of what you are as a city, but foundational elements of who you are as a people; places that have helped define you as Austinites. And collectively, they carry influence far beyond your borders. Face it. **This is not just real estate. This is hallowed ground.**

These are the addresses where ideas have gone from the margins to the mainstream, as the Palm has served as a great incubator for creativity by embracing the margins. When Christopher Stubblefield came to the Palm in the 1990s to open Stubb's Barbecue, he saw the homeless encampments behind his restaurant and music venue differently than some of today's gentrified classes. He didn't see danger. He saw the marginalized, and his restaurant opening was a statement of solidarity. It was also a powerful representation that all of the racist policies of the past couldn't keep the Palm from expressing its true self once again, complete with a gospel brunch. He got the Palm's ethos. Today, that man's barbeque sauce is found in grocery stores all over the nation, and he has become yet another “cultural ambassador” for the Palm.

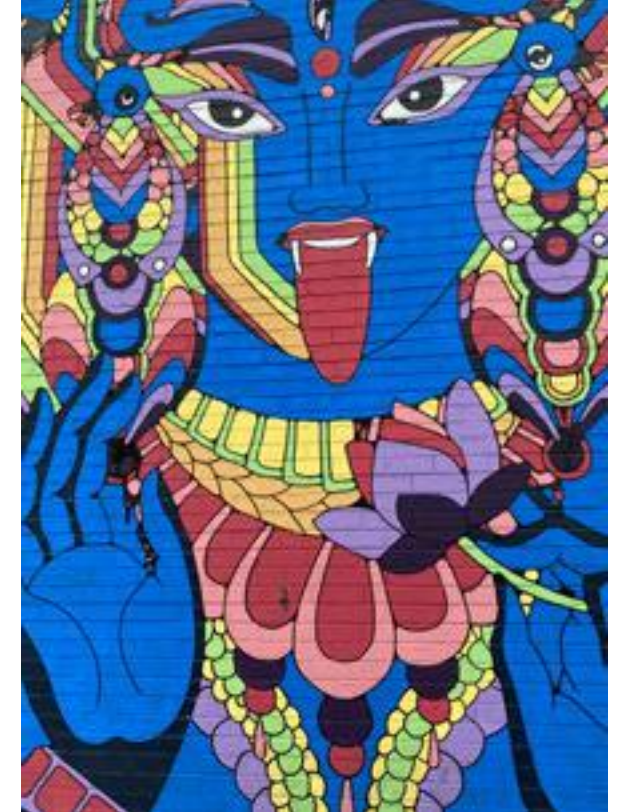
And at the gateway to it all stands the Palm School. As one participant noted, “despite all the new construction, still seeing that school there and the resilience of that structure is important.” Another emphasized that “Legions of small businesses were launched in East Austin as a result of the education children received at Palm School.” And for those cast out creators, the formerly displaced and disempowered, it's time for a homecoming.

The Palm's story isn't over. It is ready for a new chapter.

The Palm deserves a community-wide commitment moving forward. This is not to maintain some nostalgia for the past, but to unleash a new cultural renaissance for the future. The true value of the district isn't captured in the price of its land, but in the unique cultural production and innovation its people unleashed. Growth done right should reinforce and amplify these foundational elements of community identity that make the Palm special.

It is more than a little compelling to consider the narrative Austin could write for itself twenty years from now, having repaired historic divides, healed scars of the past, and together built an urban neighborhood that is epically creative. That's an opportunity worth fighting for! We can imagine how former generations of Austinites might have jumped at that opportunity if they'd been presented it. You have a chance to breath new life into this community's soul and forge a new path. The future of the Palm District will be decided not only by the plans you make, but the actions you take. Therefore, it would be a terrible waste to sit by as passive observers when the stakes are so high.

Ladies and gentlemen, citizens of Austin, the time is now. The opportunity is before you. The call to action has been sounded. You own it and you together carry the responsibility and the duty to your neighbors and fellow citizens to make this right. *Make it happen.*



Team & Acknowledgments



Team Roster

Cheryl Morgan, FAIA, Birmingham, Alabama – Team Leader

Cheryl is a licensed architect and Emerita Professor of Architecture in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture of Auburn University. In thirty years of teaching she worked with architectural programs at Georgia Institute of Technology, Oklahoma State and California College of Arts and Crafts. For the last 12 years of her teaching career she was the Director of Auburn’s Urban Studio in Birmingham, Alabama. Under Cheryl’s leadership, the Urban Studio’s Small Town Design Initiative Program worked with over 75 small towns and neighborhoods in Alabama. Morgan practiced architecture and urban design in the San Francisco Bay Area. She worked with a number of firms including Environmental Planning and Research, Gensler, and the Gruzen Partnership. Before coming to Auburn in 1992 she was an associate with the Berkeley firm of ELS/Elbasani and Logan. Morgan’s professional practice now focuses on urban design, community revitalization and graphic design. She is also an experienced facilitator. Cheryl holds two degrees from Auburn University: a Bachelor of Architecture and a Bachelor of Arts (Sociology). Her Master of Architecture degree is from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. She is certified by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards and is a member and Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. In 2010 she received the Thomas Jefferson Award from the Jefferson County Historical Commission as well as being named to a Woman of Distinction Leadership Award by Auburn’s Women’s Resource Center. In 2011 she was presented with the Alabama Chapter of the American Planning Association’s Distinguished Leadership Award recognizing her as a “Friend of Planning.” In 2012 she received one of Auburn University’s highest awards for Achievement

in Outreach. She is a member of the Rotary Club of Birmingham which honored her in 2016 with the Spain Hickman Service Award.

Rick Reinhard, Washington DC

Rick Reinhard has spent more than three decades improving cities, leading organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors throughout the U.S. and in Canada and the U.K. He has managed Business Improvement Districts and similar Downtown organizations in Washington DC, Atlanta, Buffalo, Richmond, and Londonderry, Northern Ireland. He served as Chief of Staff to the Mayor of Buffalo and chief operating officer of a Toronto-based real estate development corporation. Working as consultant to Buffalo’s Mayor, he pieced together the successful Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus, the Number One economic-development initiative today in Western New York. Rick began his career as a newspaper reporter in his hometown of Syracuse. For the past five years, Rick has worked on church repurposing and redevelopment, an excellent way to match his skills with his faith. Today, based in Rockville, Maryland, he heads a consulting firm working on the intersection of city-building and faith communities. As an adjunct faculty member, Rick has taught planning and public policy at six major research universities. With Dean Robert Shibley, he co-founded the Urban Design Project at the University at Buffalo. He has a bachelor’s degree from the College of William and Mary and a master’s degree from Rice University. He was a Loeb Fellow in Advanced Environmental Studies at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

Sherry Okun-Rudnak, MA, LEED-AP, Atlanta, GA

Sherry Okun-Rudnak leads many of BAE’s engagements, working out of Atlanta. She specializes in providing practical real estate development advisory services, economic development support, market studies, financial feasibility analyses, and placemaking strategies to BAE’s clients.

Sherry recently led an Equitable TOD analysis for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), in Atlanta, GA. MARTA is planning to develop a new transit line. As part of this effort, Sherry conducted a market analysis and prepared development feasibility testing to promote development policies that minimize displacement of existing residents and support local job creation.

Sherry is assisting the city of Winder, GA in revitalizing its downtown to create a destination through the use of arts, events, retail, branding, and building critical mass. As part of this work, Sherry is recommending development strategies for city-owned sites that can both build critical mass and create long-term revenue streams through ground lease structures.

She recently assisted the City of Long Beach on negotiating its P3 Civic Center including a new City Hall, Port Headquarters, Main Library, Lincoln Park, and new private development. The \$538 million dollar investment in downtown Long Beach has generated an estimated \$3.2 billion in private investment.

Sherry is also an Adjunct Instructor at the University of Southern California where she teaches the intersection of real estate development and planning.

Desiree Aranda, Phoenix, AZ

Desiree Aranda is a preservation planner with a decade of experience working at the intersection of heritage conservation, community planning, and public policy. She is a founder and the current co-chair of Latinos in Heritage Conservation, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and elevating historic American Latinx sites, stories, and communities. She previously worked for the San Francisco Planning Department as a preservation planner and for San Francisco Heritage as preservation project manager and later, deputy director. Desiree’s experience ranges from historical documentation and evaluation to the development of community-based cultural heritage programs. She helped create San Francisco’s Legacy Business Program, authored the enabling legislation for the Calle 24 Latino Cultural District, and contributed to multiple historic context statements focused on communities of color in California. Desiree holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Women’s Studies from the University of Georgia and a Master of Science in Planning from the University of Arizona. She is a graduate of the Advanced Oral History Institute at UC Berkeley’s Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) as well as the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture’s (NALAC) Leadership and Advocacy institutes. Desiree is an advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and is based in Phoenix, Arizona.

Paola Capo

Paola Capo is the Sustainability and Communities by Design Specialist at the AIA.. In her position, she provides architects and communities with the resources they need to create healthier, more sustainable and equitable built environments. She graduated from Georgetown University in 2017 with a degree in Science, Technology, and International Affairs, concentrating on Energy and the Environment—a degree inspired by the many places she lived growing up as an Army brat. She recently completed the 6-week [IN]City program at UC Berkeley to expand on her knowledge in urban planning.

Erin Simmons

Erin Simmons is the Senior Director of Design Assistance at the Center for Communities by Design at the AIA in Washington, DC. The Center is a provider of pro bono technical assistance and participatory planning for community revitalization. Through its design assistance programs, the AIA has worked in over 250 communities and has been the recipient of numerous awards including “Organization of the Year” by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and the “Outstanding Program Award” from the Community Development Society. Erin is a leading practitioner of the design assistance process, providing expertise, facilitation, and support for the Center’s Design Assistance Team programs. In this capacity, she works with AIA components, members, partner organizations and community leaders to provide technical design assistance to communities across the world. Her portfolio includes work in over 100 communities across the United States and internationally. Erin is an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism in London, UK. Prior to joining the AIA, Erin worked as historic preservationist and architectural historian for an environmental and engineering firm, where she practiced preservation planning, created historic district design guidelines and zoning ordinances, and conducted historic resource surveys. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Florida State University and a Master’s degree in Historic Preservation from the University of Georgia.

Joel Mills

Joel Mills is Senior Director of the American Institute of Architects’ Center for Communities by Design. The Center is a leading provider of pro bono technical assistance and democratic design for community success. Its programs have catalyzed billions of dollars in sustainable development across the United States, helping to create some of the most vibrant places in

America today. The Center’s design assistance process has been recognized with numerous awards and has been replicated and adapted across the world. Joel’s 27-year career has been focused on strengthening civic capacity, public processes and civic institutions. This work has helped millions of people participate in democratic processes, visioning efforts, and community planning initiatives. He has delivered presentations, training content, workshops and public processes in over a dozen countries across 5 continents. In the United States, Joel has provided consultative services to hundreds of communities, leading participatory processes on the ground in over 85 communities across 35 states. His work has been featured in over 1,000 media stories. Joel has served on dozens of expert working groups, boards, juries, and panels focused on civic discourse and participation, sustainability, and democracy. He was a founding Board Member of the International Association for Public Participation’s United States Chapter. He has spoken at numerous international conferences concerning democratic urbanism and the role of democracy in urban success, including serving as the Co-Convener of the Remaking Cities Congress in 2013. Joel is an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism in London, UK. He is the author of numerous articles on the relationship between democracy, civic capacity and community.

Acknowledgments

The preceding description of key priorities and strategies would not be possible without the generous time and contributions from many Austinites. As a group of outsiders, our design assistance teams are always dependent on the community’s thoughts and ideas to understand a place. However, given the virtual nature of this process and the fact that we were unable to visit the city in person, we were intently listening to understand the Palm District. The ability to listen to the community in the city-sponsored virtual public workshops, as well as review the public survey data on the Palm District and to host stakeholder sessions with key institutions was invaluable to our team’s understanding of the area. It also underscores the fact that every recommendation in this report was grounded in what we learned about public priorities and aspirations for the future of the area. The team is grateful to everyone who participated and shared thoughts about the Palm District. We would like to extend our appreciation to the following entities who led the host committee for this project and whose organizational efforts made it possible:

- City of Austin Planning and Zoning
- City of Austin Economic Development
- Austin Convention Center
- City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department
- Austin City Council District #9
- Downtown Austin Alliance
- AIA Austin
- Waterloo Greenway
- University of Texas School of Architecture
- Red River Cultural District
- Mexic–Arte Museum
- Preservation Austin
- Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority

The Palm District: Austin's Cultural Hub

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