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It's Time to Expose the Biggest Myths About Austin's Land Development Code

by Community Not Commodity

When he stepped to the podium to deliver this year's State of the City address, Austin Mayor Steve Adler focused on one problem in particular: misinformation. Taking aim at critics of the city's homelessness and policing policies, Adler attacked those who use misinformation "to polarize and divide our community" and to "divide us to gain a political or rhetorical advantage." To combat the problem, he urged local residents to "[f]ight fear with facts, and misinformation with listening and truth."

We agree with the mayor: It's time for all of us to come together and begin solving Austin's problems using facts instead of uninformed assumptions.

One of those problems is the controversial rewrite of our land development code, a process that began in 2017, with the now-infamous CodeNEXT initiative. Adler and his allies recently told the Austin Business Journal they're planning to restart the effort later this year.

Before City Hall tries to tackle the rewrite yet again, Community Not Commodity will work to dispel some of the most common myths and persistent misinformation about Austin's land development code. We will provide local residents with unvarnished facts and in-depth research to help them make sense of this complex and contentious topic.

Sadly, one of the first myths we'll be debunking has been spread by Adler himself. Here's a preview:

The previously proposed [land development code] changes would largely allow more dense development, which is intended to produce housing units at more affordable rates. Few question that a revamp of the [land development code] would yield needed housing and potentially curb traffic and home price growth to some extent.

— Steve Adler

Austin Business Journal, June 4, 2021

The mayor's claim is false. A growing number of experts doubt that a rezoning plan encouraging new, denser developments will produce the truly affordable housing Austin needs—and many believe it could make our affordability crisis even worse.

One of them is urban-studies theorist Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Once regarded as urban density's biggest champion, Florida spent years trying



to convince mayors and city planners to enact policies designed to attract wealthy, young, tech-savvy newcomers. But he has since surveyed fast-growing, increasingly expensive cities like Austin and all but admitted he was wrong.

Florida provided further explanation in a recent article for *Bloomberg CityLab*, where he dismantled pro-density claims like Adler's as "too good to be true":

[Urbanists] want to relax regulations that limit the supply of housing in already expensive cities, and start building taller and denser. It's supply and demand at work, they argue. Prices—in this case, housing prices—rise when supply is limited. Add more supply, and housing prices fall, making housing more affordable for more people, spurring more and better economic growth in the process. A new paper by two leading economic geographers suggests this argument is simply too good to be true. ... [A]s [one of the paper's authors] told me via email: "Upzoning is far from the progressive policy tool it has been sold to be. It mainly leads to building high-end housing in desirable locations."

— Richard Florida

Bloomberg CityLab, May 9, 2019

Stay tuned! We'll be taking a closer look at the study Florida cites in our next post, and we'll be dispelling other myths about zoning and the land code in the coming weeks. Make sure to check our website for all the latest updates.

Together we can build an Austin for everyone!

(Community Not Commodity is a local organization that advocates for land development policies that support community values over developer profits.

<https://communitynotcommodity.com/who-we-are/>)

NATIONAL NIGHT OUT

The first Tuesday in October each year, the entire nation recognizes National Night Out. In communities throughout America, block parties take place and information is presented on crime prevention and safety awareness. Last year over 450 parties took place in Austin. Police officers, firefighters and EMS visit as many of these parties as possible sharing with the neighbors and learning from each other and sharing ideas. Learn how to participate in this exciting event by contacting Veronica Saldate at the City of Austin by phone 512-974-4735 or email: veronica.saldate@austintexas.gov.

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Dr. Benjamin Neuman on COVID

The coronavirus behind the current pandemic is scary, but ignorance about it is even scarier. That's why Dr. Benjamin Neuman, head of the biology department at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, has been so busy lately trying to answer questions about it. Dr. Neuman is one of the world's preeminent coronavirus researchers. He has probably grown more SARS virus in the lab than anyone alive.

All viruses infect your body by entering healthy cells. There, the invader makes copies of itself and multiplies throughout your body. The coronavirus latches its spiky surface proteins to receptors on healthy cells, especially those in your lungs. Once inside, the coronavirus hijacks healthy cells and takes command. Eventually, it kills some of the healthy cells.

Blood clotting is one of the big symptoms of COVID-19. This clotting can cause damage to the heart, damage in the lungs, damage in every part of the body at the same time. According to Dr. Neuman, the coronavirus is activated by human protein. Two of the proteins involved in blood clotting can activate the coronavirus spike. When that happens, the coronavirus spike is more able to enter cells.

This could explain how people get minor symptom at first, but as the time goes on, the chance of bad things happening ramps up — which can lead to very long hospitalizations with all kinds of different problems. Right now it looks like the virus is mutating in a way that makes it more likely to be activated by a blood-clotting response.

Neuman explains that viruses must change in order to survive. One virus can turn into around 100 million inside an infected person over the course of a day. He said viruses are also sloppy in that they'll make a random mistake in about one of every three copies they make — and in some instances, those mutations can give the virus an advantage over other versions.

Though a strain may have advantages over others, Neuman said its spread often comes down to the activity of people. Two people standing 20 feet away from each other probably won't transmit the virus, regardless of the variant. But if an individual is in close contact with someone who's infected, they're likely to be exposed and likely will catch that variant if they don't have immunity.

Neuman says allowing the disease to become endemic would be a "terrible mistake." The common cold and the annual outbreaks of flu are already endemic to modern life. "We live with these because... The cost benefit ratio isn't right to knock them out, and also because we don't have vaccines that are really capable of that level of effectiveness," Neuman said.

But, he says, the vaccines available for COVID-19 are effective enough to stop the virus. Neuman says it's a mistake to expect COVID-19 to "mellow" or become less dangerous. He says it hasn't happened with other viruses, like HIV and ebola. Conquering ebola required quarantines and a vaccine.

COVID-19 cell cultures indicate that the virus, especially the delta variant, remains strong and easily spread. "I just don't think that we can count on the virus to change what it's doing to suit us," Neuman said. Additional COVID-19 variants are the result of the virus looking for new ways to spread, Neuman says.

A recent study of hospitalized COVID patients found that two "easily measured" signs of health are also distinctly predictive of higher mortality - respiration rate and blood-oxygen saturation. "Initially, most patients with COVID don't have difficulty breathing. They can have quite low oxygen saturation and still be asymptomatic," said Dr. Nona Sotoodehnia, co-director of the Cardiovascular Health Research Unit at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

According to the study, patients who were admitted, often had hypoxemia — low blood-oxygen saturation, measured at 91% or below — or tachypnea, which is fast, shallow breathing, measured at 23 breaths per minute in this study. But few reported shortness of breath or coughing.

Sotoodehnia recommended that people with positive COVID-19 test results — especially people who are at higher risk of more severe illness, such as those who have diabetes, older patients or those who are obese — obtain a pulse oximeter and monitor for blood oxygen below 92%.

It's never too late to give up our prejudices.

Henry David Thoreau



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Violet Crown Oktoberfest

Prost! The neighborhood Oktoberfest is back — this year at beautiful Brentwood Park.

Violet Crown Community Works, a 501c3 non-profit, will host the 4th annual Oktoberfest on Sunday, October 24th from 2-6 pm. As in years past, the proceeds from this event will benefit VCCW's amazing philanthropic endeavors, including the organization's brand new Microgrant Program. Past VCCW Oktoberfest events provided key funding for the incredible new playground improvements in Brentwood Park. This year's festival will be a unique opportunity to show off Phase 1 of the playground improvements, complete with a ribbon-cutting ceremony with Council Member Pool.

The playground improvements feature improved accessibility with new smooth circular paths, a dome net climber, playscape, and dodecahedron (say that 10 times fast) climbing blocks. Future phases will include additional pathways, improvements to the swing set area, and an improved sand play area with a shade structure for our tiniest community members.

As always, event steins and cups will be available for purchase and can then be filled (and refilled) for FREE with delicious, ice-cold beer donated from your favorite local breweries. A food truck will be on-site and a live band will perform throughout the event to keep you in a perky polka frame of mind. (And we might just have a few surprises in store.) More event details, including advance cup and stein sale info, will be posted on VCCW social media: @violet-crowoktoberfest @violetcrownfest @violetcrowncares @violetcrowncommunityworks

Join the festivities at Brentwood Park on 10/24 to celebrate our community, toast to what's already accomplished, and support future Violet Crown Community Works projects!

(Note: safety is a primary concern, the Oktoberfest team will have multiple COVID protocols in place.)

Ryan Drive Working Group Accepting New Members

By Anne-Charlotte Patterson, CNA Vice-President

In late August, the City Council approved staff's recommendation for 3423 Holdings to redevelop the publicly owned land at 6909 Ryan Drive. The developer's proposal promises hundreds of affordable housing units in a mix of sizes, over 3 acres of park space, an arts center, access to the Crestview metrorail station, and other community benefits.

In conjunction with approval of staff's recommendation, city council also approved an official Motion Sheet that requires the City, in their negotiations with the developer, to: "Commit to multiple City and community engagement events and collaborate with the Ryan Drive Working Group on a variety of issues pertaining to a Master Development Agreement" and "Engage the Ryan Drive Working Group to assist with community engagement activities and guide the vision for the project."

Since the group's formation in early 2018, the Ryan Drive Working Group has facilitated community engagement and provided guidance on this project. As noted by our city council, there's more work to be done by the group as the proposed project becomes a reality. The Working Group is now accepting applications for new members through October 17th. If you have an interest in how this site is developed and helping it become a model for development of public land in Austin, you may submit an application at bit.ly/2VW60B0.

Learn more about the Ryan Drive Project and contact the group via Facebook @RyanDriveGroup and ryandriveproject.wordpress.com.



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Save the Trees, Save the Pond at Northwest Park

By Mary Fero, Allandale resident and pond advocate

The first opportunity since 1987 for our community to provide input in a Vision Plan to guide the future of Beverly S. Sheffield Northwest District Park has resulted in options that fail to offer a true choice to restore one of its most beloved amenities – the duck pond at the center of the park.

Relying on consultant-planners, city staff has presented neighbors and friends of the park two choices: expand the pond in a way that disrupts habitat and requires removal of magnificent bald cypress trees, or “Do Nothing.”

In surveys, a park event, personal communications and zoom meetings, the community weighed in: enhance shade within the park; preserve natural habitat; and improve and maintain the duck pond. By the time the tree-cutting details were revealed at the end of the vision planning process, many people were no longer engaged.

There should be another alternative: **Improve the existing pond.**

While pond expansion plans would add water circulation and supplement the pond with fresh water, PARD’s “Option 0” for the existing pond designates ZERO funding for improvements. The expansion plan includes funding for pond maintenance; the existing pond plan gets ZERO.

Community members for years have asked PARD for aerators and pond maintenance, but PARD has yet to put forward a budget request. Rather than “Do Nothing,” let’s get this done. By improving the existing pond, we can save the trees and we can save the habitat.

Beverly Sheffield was PARD director when the land for Northwest Park was purchased in 1955, and the “duck pond”

was promoted in the first announcements about the park. PARD should honor their former director and this park’s namesake and restore the pond for all who have loved it through the years.

Save the trees, save the pond at Beverly S. Sheffield Northwest District Park!

Share your views:

- Darcy.Nuffer@austintexas.gov - PARD Vision Plan project manager
- Kimberly.McNeeley@austintexas.gov PARD Director
- Councilmember Leslie Pool district7@austintexas.gov.

Leaving Trees Alone Might Be Better Than Planting New Ones

(Editor’s note: the following is an excerpt from an interview with policy scientist William Moomaw that was originally published in Yale Environment 360 in October of 2019. It is reprinted here as it relates to the efforts to save the bald cypress trees in Northwest Park.)

“The most effective thing that we can do is to allow trees that are already planted, that are already growing, to continue growing to reach their full ecological potential, to store carbon, and develop a forest that has its full complement of environmental services,” said policy scientist William Moomaw.

We’ve seen a lot of interest lately in planting more trees. And planting trees is great and it makes us all feel good and it’s a wonderful thing to do and we absolutely should be reforesting areas that have been cut. A recent paper talked about how we could plant more than a trillion trees on nearly a billion hectares of land and how much that would do to solve the problem. These are great things to do, but they will not make much of a difference in the next two or three decades because little trees just don’t store much carbon. Letting existing natural forests grow is essential to any climate goal we have.



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Garden Projects for Reusing Old Items

By Nancy Harris, CNA Treasurer

Looking for a yard project that will also keep items that have outlived their usual function from ending up in the landfill? Not only will these ideas create useful or eye-catching displays in your yard or garden, they will help promote the practice of reuse and recycling.



Old furniture can make a striking planter. Decorate an old chair to your taste, then cut the seat out making a hole large enough for your potted plant but not so large that it will fall thorough. Or try adorning an old dresser then placing potted plants in the partially opened drawers. (Be sure to counter balance the weight so it won't tip over!)

Create a vertical herb, flower or succulents garden by attaching tin cans to a fence, remembering to take into account the light needs of the plants. (Just remember to drill holes in the bottom for drainage.) Other ideas are to use your old cans with plants in them to create borders or, if you are feeling really creative, fashion an original sculpture of old cans.



Glass jars are not only useful for storing seeds, but they can also make good planters. Either choose jars with an opening wide enough for your plant or use glass cutters to remove the base of taller bottles. Long-necked bottles can also be pushed into the ground to create borders around beds. If they are filled with water and have small holes punched into the caps, they will add thermal mass to keep temperatures stable in a growing area, and can slowly release water for plants in the same way as watering globes bought for this function.



Other items which can be repurposed as planters include chipped teacups, broken bowls or old colanders. Or maybe an old bicycle or those leaky rain boots could get a new life as a planter.

If your plants are larger, old sinks, bathtubs or wheelbarrows make attractive planters. Don't forget the holes for drainage and to elevate them off the ground to avoid water retention.

Look at those old objects around the house with new eyes before you toss them out, or go online and look for some of the many ideas that you will find. With a little imagination, there is no telling what you might come up with!



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