



## Innovation Award Application 2014



### **The City of Austin: Five Strategies for Innovative Implementation**

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## Describe the Program/project/ product/ service innovation:

Imagine Austin is the plan for the future. Borne of ideas and contributions from the entire Austin community, this 30-year plan for the city is based on input from Austin's greatest asset: its people. This long range plan lays out a vision for how the city can grow in a sustainable way. However, without a strategy for implementation a comprehensive plan will never achieve it vision and goals for the future.

While most cities use a comprehensive plan to provide direction on funding capital improvement projects, changing regulations and providing land use policies, the Imagine Austin implementation process is a five point implementation program, which not only includes strategies for Public Investment and Regulations, but Education & Engagement, Internal Alignment, and Partnerships to carry out the vision of the overall comprehensive plan. These five strategies are designed to increase collaboration between citizen stakeholders and community leaders, creating a synergy of action to implement the comprehensive plan well beyond the limit of the written words.

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## Short description of the importance, internal impact, and community benefits:

Change isn't easy. Actively preparing for change and uncertainty can be even harder. However, the rewards usually outweigh the hardships. Having imagined a better Austin, it is essential to follow through and fully implement Austin's vision for the future by being innovative and proactive.

Austin is a rapidly growing City with an estimated additional 750,000 residents by the year 2039. In addition, Austin has grown primarily in a sprawling fashion that has led to numerous challenges such as traffic, affordability and drinking water impacts. Imagine Austin was created to address these challenges by creating a sustainable city.

As we look to the future contained in the comprehensive plan, we have an incredible opportunity to be more intentional about the future chapters in Austin's development. Growth has had and can continue to be a tremendous benefit for Austin, but not if we continue to incur environmental, fiscal, and social costs. That's why we devised an innovative implementation process to ensure the public and city staff is actively engaging with Imagine Austin.

The Imagine Austin five point implementation programs describe how city departments can use these strategies to accomplish Imagine Austin's vision, policies and actions. When city departments and citizen stakeholders work hand in hand to improve the community in which they all live, the benefits are widespread.

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## What makes this a quantum leap of creativity?

Beyond the typical capital improvement projects and regulatory changes that comprehensive plans are used for, three specific strategies, Education and Engagement, Internal Alignment, and Partnerships, each play a significant role encouraging greater participation in the implementation of the vision of Imagine Austin.

Creating and sustaining educational and engagement programming, Internal Alignment, and Partnerships are at the heart of implementing the Imagine Austin Plan. To create buy in and promote innovative ideas, the Imagine Austin Speaker's Series was created to build a culture of common understanding and collaboration between its citizens and staff. Nationally renowned experts are continually invited to Austin to educate its residents and citizens on a wide range of innovative ideas, foster dialogue, and promote beneficial change. Another program, The Compact and Connected training program, was developed to educate departmental staff on the Compact and Connected Priority Program, which includes policies and actions concerning land use policy, transportation and growth management, and assist in this program's implementation. Within the year, this training program will be open to residents of Austin to create even greater collaboration and understanding. Collaboration between the City of Austin's Planning and Development Review department and Architecture in Schools is also currently underway, and is an effort to engage 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders in their curriculum so that in the future they will be a more engaged and educated citizen. This program was inspired by Daniel Burnham's efforts to educate students on the Chicago Plan and implement the vision of that plan. Volunteers from city departments will help facilitate in the classroom setting, helping students learn how they can take charge of their future.

Engaging Austinite's in the plan has not only been vital, but fun! Through the use of interactive social media (Twitter, Facebook) at various Imagine Austin events, more than 8,000 online followers were included in the Imagine Austin public hearing process and various events as Imagine Austin began to come alive. By refusing to rely solely on governmental speeches at City Hall, the Imagine Austin implementation plan invited residents to several fun launch parties that included elements of Austin's creative economy by highlighting the talent of our iconic and vibrant live music culture.

Internal alignment is being achieved by identifying eight priority programs that various departments can collaborate on together has been one of the most effective and innovative ways the Imagine Austin vision has become a tangible reality. The priority programs working groups relate shared Imagine Austin policies and actions that involve multiple City of Austin departments. These interdisciplinary teams of key stakeholders from various City departments are then able to track, prioritize, and implement policies and actions. In the upcoming year, we hope to invite outside organizations and interested citizen stakeholders to also participate in these working groups. In September 2013, a TedxCity2.0 event was held to engage participants (citizens) through carefully crafted "priority exercises" to help inform priority teams what they could do implement Imagine Austin and work with key partners in each priority program to implement the plan.

CodeNEXT, a priority program to revise the City of Austin's Land Development Code, is an extension of Imagine Austin implementation plan. By promoting collaboration between Austin's residents, the business community, and civic institutions, the goal is to help align our land use standards and regulations to what is considered vitally important to the community. Community meetings, Imagine Austin Speakers Series events, and workshops actively engage Austin residents by giving them a voice in how the code will be changed to help shape the future of their neighborhoods.

Creating sustainable and innovative partnerships is a cornerstone to the community-wide vision encompassed in Imagine Austin. As part of the plan adoption and 5 point implementation strategies, Imagine Austin invites residents, local companies, non-profits and other governmental agencies to help realize the mission and vision of Austin's comprehensive plan by providing valuable resources. Building on the Architecture in Schools project, Imagine Austin planners collaborate with internal departments, external agencies and community leaders to help shape and form the building blocks of a more compact, connected and complete Austin community. Collaborating on projects ranging from public works to watershed protection, planners and departmental staff work together to further realize the progress detailed in Imagine Austin and eliminate the all too common effect of working in silos towards a mutual goal.

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### Who benefits?

Through a proactive implementation strategy that includes input and collaboration from every city department, including the City Manager's office, ultimately the entire Austin community benefits, making Austin one of the best managed cities in the United States.

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### How was the program/project/product/service initiated and implemented?

The five strategies of the Imagine Austin implementation program were initiated from plan origin; the comprehensive plan had built into the structure of it the priorities for ensuring the plan did not disappear after adoption. The strategies are comprised of five components; Education & Engagement, Internal Alignment, Regulations, Public Investment, and Partnerships. Soon after plan adoption, the City created a process where priority program teams regularly report to department directors as well as the City Manager's Office, who in turn provide support and direction. In addition, the City Charter requires an annual report documenting the success of our implementation efforts, placing additional requirements that the annual report, and progress made over the year, to City Council and the supplemental planning office.

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### What risks were taken?

Austin is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States. Not since the late 70s had the city created such a visible and visionary comprehensive plan designed to help the entire community adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Identifying key strategies for implementing a plan designed by more than 18,000 stakeholders provided crucial input and ensures that Imagine Austin will go far beyond an academic exercise with no real impact to the community.

Rather than evaluating what risks were taken in designing and implementing the comprehensive plan, the implementation plan was borne of the inherit risk of **not** addressing the needs of a rapidly growing community and thus failing to quickly address and implement those goals and actions identified by stakeholders.

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### What, if any were the costs and/or savings?

Improved collaboration between departments and city leaders leads to a significant cost savings, buy-in, and tax revenue for the City of Austin by creating a more compact and connected community. It is also known that compact and connected development has better fiscal benefits than low density sprawl. An example of these benefits is in the plan for Austin's South Central Waterfront Plan Initiative, implemented through Imagine Austin, for the redeveloping the waterfront on Austin's Lady Bird Lake. Using a tool to analyze a vision put forth by the Sustainable Design Assessment Team that involves more open spaces, pedestrian friendly walkways, mixed use residential and retail development, affordable housing and greatly increased connectivity, Austin stakeholders now understand that they can see a \$21M return on investment in the South Central Waterfront District.

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### What are the lessons learned that other local governments can learn from?

Emphasizing the importance of collaboration and implementation programs is a model of a unified approach to strategic initiatives. Imagine Austin demonstrates that there is more than one way for city governments to use their comprehensive plans to benefit the entire community. Imagine Austin goes well beyond just zoning and development; the plan includes initiatives to strengthen the social equity, creative land use models, strengthen governmental collaboration and bring significant resources to bear for the benefit of all.

Creative thinking allows us to produce what we have done so far and what we will do in the future. Imagine Austin has been recognized as a best practice in civic engagement, innovation, and comprehensive community planning. With that designation comes enormous responsibility. The Imagine Austin team has worked with more than 100 cities, counties, and planning and engagement organizations across the globe creating a "Knowledge Exchange." In 2013 alone, the Imagine Austin team shared advice and exchanged ideas with organizations in Australia, Arizona, Nebraska, Massachusetts, Arkansas, Louisiana and with our friends in Texas.

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### What department and/or individual(s) championed the innovation? If a contractor was used, please list the name and their contact information.

All City of Austin departments are champions to implement Imagine Austin, including the City Manager's Office.

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### Any additional information you would like to share?