

July 30, 2022

Cc: City Manager Spencer Cronk, Assistant City Manager Stephanie Hayden-Howard, City of Austin Planning Commission, City of Austin Parks and Recreation Board

Re: Commuter Commercial Parkland Dedication

Mayor Adler, Mayor Pro Tem Alter, and Austin City Council,

We, the undersigned organizations, ask that you please vote in favor of amending the Commuter Parkland Dedication Ordinance in City Code Chapter 25- I (General Requirements and Procedures) to require parkland dedication for office, industrial, and commercial developments. Commuter Commercial Parkland Dedication (hereafter referred to as Commercial PLD or CPLD) requirements are vital to promoting the health and well-being of Austin's workforce, closing critical gaps in park and trail infrastructure, and slowing the loss of park access as indicated by a current pattern of declining park acres/ resident.

Austin's park acreage per 1,000 residents has decreased from approximately 24 acres to 19 acres in the last ten years. If this pattern continues, **we will have gone from 24 acres per person in the early 2010s to 9 acres per person by 2032. We must stop this downward trajectory.** Furthermore, the metro region is growing at a faster rate than the City itself (43% Metro to Austin's 22% population growth from 2010 to 2020). This makes the outlook even bleaker as much of this metro population also utilizes the City of Austin park system.

The existing residential PLD ordinance has helped to acquire 125 acres of parkland in the last three years alone (equal to 31 new or expanded parks) and has funded 76 new park development projects. However, it is not enough to support the demands of Austin's residential and commuter workforce population.

Currently, 57% of Austin's workforce reside outside of the city limits. These individuals and their families utilize Austin's rich park system before and after work and on the weekends. There is currently no funding mechanism that accounts for the high cost necessary to meet the demands on park space and amenities of this growing metropolitan ex-urban population.

The success of Austin's residential PLD ordinance is evident in the many admired parks that have been created and improved. These parks include dedicated parks such as Goodnight Ranch Pocket Park, Saltillo Plaza Pocket Park, and Woodrow Pocket Park; acquired parks such as Great Hills Neighborhood Park, Tillery Pecan Pocket Park, and the historic Wood Street Settlement on Shoal Creek downtown; and new park amenities, including a new playground at Battle Bend Neighborhood Park and new play features at Georgian Acres Neighborhood Park.

Another great success story is the Walnut Creek Greenbelt, in which 100 acres of the greenbelt were dedicated or purchased with PLD funds. Incorporating commercial requirements in the

City's PLD ordinance **will substantially improve Austin's network of greenbelts, parks, and trails** and will thus advance the City towards its active transportation and park goals. Currently, when implementing the City's greenbelt or trail plans, we can only utilize PLD to incrementally piece together sections of those important connections through the parcels that develop as residential. **However, without commercial PLD requirements, important connections are lost** in the parcels that develop as industrial, retail, and office spaces, jeopardizing the entire active corridor. For example, assemblages along Little Walnut Creek were interrupted by a property with over 2,600 linear feet along the creek that is set for industrial use. **Instituting commercial PLD will allow us to meet our goals of increasing recreation and active transportation opportunities** and close critical gaps in Austin's green space network.

Austin's affordability crisis is not being caused by City fees. The market demand dictates rents and sale prices. Further, the Parks and Recreation Department estimates that parkland dedication fees would account for less than 1 percent of a commercial project's hard costs.

Other cities in Texas and around the country utilize commercial PLD fees with great success, such as: Hutto, El Paso, and Colleyville in Texas, along with Sacramento, California, Denver, Colorado, and Atlanta, Georgia. It is time for Austin to join these cities in using commercial parkland dedication requirements to more effectively support its park system. In FY2020 El Paso added 22.16 acres to their park system through Parkland Dedication (residential and commercial requirements). In the same year, El Paso received over \$9M in Parkland Dedication fees, over \$8M of which has been allocated to park acquisitions and improvements across the City. Notable projects include a new playscape at Inca Dove Park, as well as the dedication of North Desert Park and Holly Springs Linear Park.

The parks department is anticipating an estimated \$3.5 million annually from the new CPLD ordinance based on the formula and the amount of commercial development permitted the last few years. This new ordinance would yield approximately 10 acres of parkland/year. It is worth noting that this is an important but much smaller contribution to the park system than the residential parkland dedication contributes each year and should be considered a supplemental tool toward the goal of keeping our parkland level of service steady and staving off the current declines we are experiencing.

There are limited mechanisms available to fund parks. If we do not take this important step and ask that growth and development pay for the new parks and amenities needed for residents and commuters, we increase the burden on tax payers by having to increasingly turn to bonds. The only other option is to accept that in 10 years Austin will have much lower park access (appx 9 acres/resident in comparison to our historical 24.) **Austin is known and cherished for its parks and greenspaces and we must make policy decisions that will maintain our identity and high quality of life as a green city.**

We ask that you approve the commuter commercial parkland dedication ordinance and preserve the residential parkland dedication ordinance in order to improve Austin's park system in proximity to where people live, work, and play.

Sincerely,

Joanna Wolaver
AO Board Chair