In 2004, a nonprofit planning group called Envision Central Texas released a collection of seven goals for the Central Texas region, offering a roadmap for the explosive population growth that’s expected in the next twenty years. This story examines how that vision matches today’s reality and what challenges still remain for Austin to become...

The City We Want

by Michelle Moon Reinhardt
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

I have a friend who moved to Austin two years ago from Washington, D.C. All the things that I complain about in Austin: the traffic, the rising cost of housing, the loss of Austin’s unique character, elicits a sigh and a long, laborious eye-roll.

“You don’t know how good you’ve got it here,” he says, with the pressing knowledge of someone who’s lived in a truly challenging city. “This is heaven.”

This comes from a guy who lived in D.C. for more than a decade and cashed out near the peak of that city’s real estate market. (If you have to leave such an unlivable city, it’s best to do it with a lot of cash in your pocket.)

He makes a strong point—compared to many cities, Austin is a much friendlier place to raise a family, friendlier people, friendlier weather, and there’s even parking downtown. (I don’t even ask how much it costs to park downtown in D.C., a question that is likely to bring on another eye-rolling episode.)

Perhaps it’s because we have it so good that people feel so invested in what happens to this city and, in a larger sense, this region. Austin has been described as “terminally democratic” because so many of our fine citizens want a say in its future.

What do you love about Austin? Maybe it’s the spring-fed swimming holes, the quirky shops along South Congress or the fact that you can hear live music any night of the week. People feel strongly about this city—and they tend to want to keep it just like they found it when they got here.

“People tenaciously cling to Austin. There’s something in the water, something about (Lady Bird) Lake, something about what we’re doing, that keeps people here. It is one of the few cities in the country where there’s a convergence of like-minded people,” says Cliff Redd, a native Austinite and executive director of the Long Center for the Performing Arts. “At the same time, we are a city that’s very change resistant—we want it to freeze in time.” Redd and many others say that’s the dangerous part—no city thrives when frozen. Stagnation leads to rot.

Change in Central Texas is happening, welcome or not. Between the years 1996 and 2006, the population of Central Texas grew by forty-one percent—nearly double the rate of Texas, and three and a half times the growth of the nation as a whole, according to statistics from The Austin Chamber of Commerce. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that one hundred million people will be added to the U.S. population by 2050. Central Texas is one of the ten regions expected to grow the most, doubling its current size.

“The attitude of Envision Central Texas is that change is inevitable. The question becomes how do we shape that change?” says Jim Walker, board chair for Envision Central Texas.
That’s been the philosophy of the nonprofit Envision Central Texas since it was formed in 2001, when a group of business, political and community leaders wanted to focus the discussion about growth. They wanted to address the strain on transportation infrastructure, housing and the natural environment, before it became dire. In response to Austin’s democratic nature, they launched an intensive two-year planning process that eventually polled thousands of people in the five-county region, from political leaders to local residents.

The result was a Vision for Central Texas, a plan that summarized all the hopes and dreams for the future, including a new transit system, development of smart, mixed-use neighborhoods with affordable housing, and a thriving local economy. The vision encompassed big ideas like increased racial harmony and social equity and a goal that all of Central Texas would start thinking and planning as if we were in this together.

Now, it’s five years from that first survey of Central Texas residents and Envision Central Texas is marking the anniversary by looking back and assessing what elements of the vision were realized, and which ones still remain challenges. The group has recently released a vision progress assessment, meant to evaluate how far the region has come in achieving the vision set out five years ago.

Their recent findings, gathered in interviews with key employers and public sector leaders and community-wide meetings, reveal some great successes. On the plus side, nearly every employer in the region said their business is doing better—or much better—than it was five years ago. The region today also has a better variety of jobs available. New development downtown offers a wider variety of housing choices, along with new retail and restaurant corridors. We live in a safe region with low crime rates, when compared to cities of similar size. Austin remains one of the highest-ranked cities in the nation in terms of entertainment, with a vibrant live music scene. The newly-completed Long Center for the Performing Arts gives the city a world-class venue for cultural arts.

However, there are several looming issues that could dramatically restrict new growth and choke the vitality of the region. Water supplies have emerged as a worry among private citizens and public officials alike. Despite conservation efforts, suburbs are gobbling up large tracts of land in outlying counties, with county governments helpless to regulate that growth. Leaders fear escalating housing prices will force musicians to pack up and leave (not to mention teachers and police officers, many of whom already live in the suburbs). Traffic and congestion—a longstanding problems—continue to top the list of concerns, with many frustrated by the slow progress toward a flexible transit system.

“Do I have personal frustration that more hasn’t been done?” says Walker. “Sure, I do. Should that push us into bad decisions? No.”

Walker cautions that Envision Central Texas (ECT) has no planning, legislative or regional authority, but instead acts as an advocacy group, providing education and vision to those groups that do have decision-making authority. That said, ECT has a cast of regional heavy-hitters on its executive board, from mayors of surrounding cities to executives from the largest employers, healthcare providers and transportation groups. So while the nonprofit has no formal power, it has the attention of those who do.

“Austin is going to grow,” says Walker. “We need to preserve what’s special to us. The question becomes not if, but how. How do we preserve that character and the things we love about Austin while still attracting economic growth?”

That is the balance that few modern cities have been able to achieve. Portland, Oregon, is held up as the perennial example of a city that has thrived, in part due to making choices such as building a transit system that averages more than one hundred thousand weekday riders. Portland has made some bold moves, such as removing an elevated highway downtown and replacing it with park space. The city has embraced high-density, mixed-use development along its transit corridors. The choices Austin makes in the next five years with the help of planning groups like ECT will have a sweeping effect on the economic progress assessment: transportation, land use and water.

A tale of two commuters
ECT Vision: “An effective transportation system that got ahead of the curve.”

It’s five o’clock, and somewhere on the parkway that turns parking lot sits Kim Sadler and ten thousand of her closest friends. Her daily commute by car from one end of MoPac Expressway to the other averages forty minutes to an hour, and it’s always worse in the afternoon.

“On Friday, if you don’t get on the road by 3:30, you might as well wait until seven,” says Sadler, who works in marketing for an educational publisher. “In the afternoon, the traffic (southbound) is backed up to Far West Boulevard. Most of the time, there is no accident. There’s just too many cars on the road.”

And more cars are being added every day. According to The Austin Chamber of Commerce’s Take on Traffic campaign, five hundred cars are added every week. “I wish there was an alternative,” says Sadler. “I would definitely ride a train if I could catch it to work.”

According to the ECT vision progress assessment, sixty-six percent of Central Texas residents polled said that transportation was one of the three most important issues facing the region.

Mike Dahmas has long been committed to commuting without a car. For years, he rode his bike an hour to work as a software developer. Dahmas figured he actually saved time by cycling to work, “It was a half-hour car commute or an hour bike ride. The way I figure it, I was spending a half-hour to get an hour of exercise.” Not to mention what he saved on gas and gym membership fees.

Earlier this year, Dahmas’ company relocated further from his home, creating a real dilemma. Too far to bike, Dahmas tried the bus, but discovered his commute would entail a walk, a twenty-minute bus ride, a downtown transfer, a second bus ride, and a final walk—(yes, it was uphill). “It took me an hour and forty-five minutes to do that commute, and I did it several times,” says Dahmas. “It was just too far.” So Dahmas surrendered and bought a second car. Now, he, too, sits in traffic every afternoon.

Several new tolls roads have alleviated traffic along some corridors. At this moment, the only transit system available to Austin residents is the bus system. While four-dollar-a-gallon gas has increased ridership by eleven percent, according to Capital Metro, the bus is not a dramatically faster alternative, because too often it’s sitting in the same traffic as everyone else and because, as Dahmas learned, getting where you want to go isn’t always easy.

Capital Metro is scheduled to launch a new commuter rail system that will run on existing freight tracks from Leander to the Convention Center in downtown Austin (a total of thirty-two miles). Six rail cars have been purchased and each can carry a maximum of two hundred passengers. Initially, rail service was set to begin this fall but, according to a Capital Metro spokesperson, MetroRail has been delayed by construction contracts and will not begin service until the end of the year. No firm date has been set.
Capital MetroRail trains will stop at stations every half-hour during the morning and afternoon commutes, says Todd Hemingson, vice president of strategic planning and development for Capital Metro. “It’s a huge challenge to accommodate the growth that we’re seeing in Austin,” says Hemingson. “It’s exciting to use rail as a means of shaping it.”

“It’s a little like building ninety percent of a bridge,” says Wade Cooper, local attorney and member of the Transit Working Group of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO). “Commuter rail doesn’t get passengers to their final destination without changing modes,” he says. “People want a more seamless way of getting to the Capitol and downtown area.”

The new Capital MetroRail line will deposit commuters at the Austin Convention Center, where they will have to rely on buses, pedicabs or car-sharing to get them to the final destination, says Capital Metro’s Hemingson.

“Among planners, there’s a quarter-mile rule of thumb,” says Dahmas, who served on the city’s Urban Transportation Commission from 2000 to 2005. “People are only willing to walk a quarter-mile from the station to their final destination, and the Convention Center is farther than that from most of the largest downtown office buildings.” The Capitol and the University of Texas are even farther.

The other real issue with the new MetroRail is capacity. According to Capital Metro, the MetroRail will only be able to carry a maximum of two thousand trips per day at its launch. Houston, on the other hand, invested in a light-rail system for seven miles of downtown. In 2007, it carried an average of thirty-thousand trips per day, according to the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County’s Annual Report. In June, Houston City Council members approved adding thirty new miles to the existing system.

Most cities that have successful light-rail systems began with a downtown line to move people in and around the most congested part of the city, then added commuter lines that bring people into and around the city. Both Houston and Dallas have followed this transit model. After Austin’s light-rail system was defeated in the November 2000 election, Capital Metro revised its approach, turning this successful model on its head.

“You pick the one line that is able to carry twenty-five to forty-thousand people a day, and that way, you are able to make the case to build more lines,” says Dahmas. He says Austin’s commuter line will not be able to attract the number of riders needed to build a case for adding more lines. “It’s why commuter rail will prove to be a disaster,” he says. “If we had just voted for light rail back in 2000, we would be having a much different discussion about transit today.”

Cooper says, “It’s ironic that Dallas and even Houston—where they are so auto-centric—have been quicker to embrace light rail than Austin,” where nearly fifty-thousand students vie for a few thousand parking spaces. Local transit groups are still touting light-rail systems as a viable addition to commuter rail, including a recent proposal to extend a light-rail system from the airport to downtown, through the University of Texas and then east to the emerging Mueller development.

Cooper says the CAMPO Transit Working Group is advocating a more aggressive approach to use the rail lines already here. “We are blessed with a lot of existing rails—there’s already a bird’s nest on the ground,” he says. “They are underutilized assets that stretch across the city and into our fastest-growing outlying communities, even out to the new State Highway 130 corridor.”

One of those outlying communities already planning for the eventual arrival of rail is Elgin. The Elgin Economic Development Corporation purchased eighty acres of land on an existing freight line to accommodate development around a future transit hub. “We have strong rural heritage here in Elgin,” says City Manager Jeff Coffee. “We really want to preserve our farmland and open space.” To do that, Coffee envisions more dense development centers that mix residential with retail and park space, similar to Austin’s Triangle development flanked by Lamar Boulevard and Guadalupe Street. “Our residents are beginning to advocate for mass transit, as traffic on Highway 290 gets worse and more people begin to move out this way,” he says.

“We need a comprehensive multimodal transportation system in Austin,” says Coffee, “and we just don’t have it. It ultimately will come about as more people demand alternative modes of transportation.”

Of all the groups involved in planning transit in Austin—from the City of Austin to Capital Metro to CAMPO—all agree that paying for a system is the major hurdle. “There’s room to build, and we have the existing track,” says Cooper. “It’s just where does the money come from?” Perhaps with four-dollar gasoline, voters will be more willing to fund such a system.

Coffee thinks so. He recounts a recent chat he had at the local auto shop with two Elgin residents, both waiting for their large pickups to be repaired. They were complaining about the increased cost of gasoline and both agreed that a rail system was desperately needed. “They told me, ‘We should have had it a long time ago,’” Coffee says.

**Walkable, affordable neighborhoods**

ECT Vision: “A variety of housing choices affordable for everyone in the region.”

As odd as it sounds, the stylish, high-end shopping district, known as The Domain, may become the model for neighborhoods in a section of North Austin currently known for a scattering of warehouses and car lots.

With dozens of tony retailers like Tiffany & Co., Calypso Christiane Celle and Juicy Couture, along with upscale restaurants like Kona Grill, The Domain sits on the northern edge of the North Burnet Gateway Neighborhood Planning Area, which stretches from MoPac Expressway east to Metric Boulevard and south to US Highway 183 (Research Boulevard). The City of Austin has rezoned this large area to accommodate the kind of new, mixed-use development that The Domain represents. By adding acres of office space, residential lofts and additional commercial development, the neighborhood could eventually accommodate up to eighty-thousand new residents, evolving into a “second downtown.”

“The area will have a much more urban feel,” says Molly Scarbrough, with the City of Austin’s Neighborhood Planning and Zoning Department. “The buildings will be closer to the street, with shaded trees and wide sidewalks. There will be no surface parking (lots) and the development will include parks and open space.”
City planners like Scarbrough envision a transformed neighborhood in the next twenty years. Currently, the area has fewer than five-thousand residents, an extremely low population density, because it largely contains a mix of warehouses, industrial areas and commercial developments. Scarbrough says this twenty-three-hundred-acre section of the city presents “a tremendous opportunity for redevelopment.”

That work has already begun. Endeavor Real Estate Group has broken ground on a new section of The Domain development totaling one hundred seventy-six acres. This section will include residential, office and retail space close to major employers like IBM and National Instruments.

“Our vision is that residents would have a freedom of mobility in this kind of neighborhood. Work may be down the street. It’s easy to get around without a vehicle. That was a key part of our vision. Once you’re in the area, you can access transit, walk or bike—and it’s a pleasant experience,” says Scarbrough.

The North Burnet/Gateway Neighborhood Planning Area is bisected by the new Capital MetroRail commuter line that runs on the Austin and Northwest Railroad tracks, as well as the Union Pacific Railroad tracks that could accommodate the future Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail service. “With the introduction of commuter rail in that area, it allows for a different kind of development,” she says. “With rail, the neighborhood becomes a destination for business, shopping and living.”

This new kind of development—called mixed-use, transit-oriented development—is the result of several factors. One is a desire to improve land use, to use or repurpose available land to accommodate as many people as possible. Recent development models have resulted in sprawling suburbs with large lots, dispersed communities that rely on the car to get around. Because land use is closely tied with transportation needs, city planners say a new commuter rail line encourages denser developments, incorporating town homes and condos. There are also demographic factors at play here. In 1970, thirty-eight percent of households in Austin were married couples with children. By 2007, those households had shrunk to twenty-five percent. A report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shows that there’s been an eighty-eight percent growth in the number of households without children nationwide. Those types of households aren’t necessarily fond of a single-family house with a yard—or the maintenance that comes with it. “The shift in housing need that’s occurring is tremendous,” says Scarbrough. “Housing for the young professional or young couple, the empty nester or single-parent family is different than a house in the suburb. And until recently, there haven’t been many choices.”

Developing these dense, transit-oriented developments is an idea that ECT also has advocated. In several scenarios revealed to the public five years ago, ECT consultants showed how placing these development nodes at key points around the city could reduce traffic congestion, protect environmentally sensitive areas and limit sprawl. (Those are some of the primary reasons for the recent downtown residential building boom.)

“We couldn’t have done the North Burnet (Gateway Master) Plan without the ECT vision,” says Scarbrough. “They helped introduce the theories of why we want to create these high-density development nodes, and people have bought into these theories.”

“Today, people are choosing to live in single-family houses because that’s what’s available. That puts a greater demand for that type of housing, driving up prices and pushes (moderate-income) families further and further out, looking for something that meets their budget,” says Scarbrough. The ECT vision progress assessment shows that residents chose land use and cost of living as the second- and third-most important issues facing Austin (after transportation).

Here’s why: according the U.S. Census Bureau, while median wages in Austin grew by eight percent from 2000 to 2006, the cost of a median house grew twenty-eight percent. The trend particularly affects moderate-income families, those who earn between thirty thousand and seventy thousand dollars a year. The same study showed that in 2006, a third of Austin homeowners were making mortgage payments totaling more than thirty percent of their wages, which by definition is not affordable housing.

Many Austin leaders feel that unless the city’s rising cost of housing is addressed, it will become an obstacle to sustainable development.

“Nothing hurts a city—and nothing hurts sustainability—more than a lack of housing choices that work for everyone,” says Robin Rather, ECT board member and chief executive of Collective Strength, an Austin-based consulting firm. “The economy stagnates because companies can’t attract employees, sprawl worsens because people move much further outside of cities, traffic increases and it goes downhill from there.”

Rather, however, says instead of helping, dense, transit-oriented developments like the Gateway master plan tend to accelerate the lack of affordable housing. “Do we really want Austin to be a livable city only for those who can afford a million-dollar home? Austin’s history as a place that welcomes ‘geeks, freaks, suits and boots’ is what made us strong. Gentrifying Austin is not good for the economy, not good for equity between social classes and races, not good for the character of most neighborhoods and definitely not good for the environment,” she says. “ECT could and should take a leading role in focusing attention on housing—and the sooner, the better.”

**Water worries**

ECT Vision: “An environment that is beloved and protected forever. Sustainable water supplies, both surface and groundwater, for our region.”

One thing you understand pretty quickly when looking at these issues, is that they are inexorably intertwined. Transportation, land use, development, pollution, natural resources, even the very character of a community, are linked. Like the slender, wooden blocks in the balancing game of Jenga, move one, and the others shift as well.

It’s not just folks who live in Austin who are trying to cope with this changing landscape. Residents in the quiet Hays County town of Wimberley are being affected by issues like sprawl and land use, as well. In the beauty of the largely undeveloped hills, water has become the biggest concern when it comes to development.

“Even under normal rainfall conditions, we’re at one hundred percent demand on the water source here,” says Patrick Cox, PhD, local resident and president of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association (WVWA), a nonprofit group that owns Jacob’s Well and advocates for water sustainability and protection.

In April, a local developer unveiled plans to build more than four hundred homes on six hundred seventy-five acres west of Wimberley in a development called True Ranch. Initially, the proposal called for some homes to use groundwater from a well dipping into the Trinity Aquifer, and eventually, water from a pipeline that would draw from Canyon Lake.

Residents quickly became concerned that the large-scale development would drain water from the Trinity Aquifer, the primary source of drinking water for thousands of residents in that section of Hays County. The aquifer is also the source for Jacob’s Well and Blue Hole, the equivalent of Austin’s Barton Springs for Wimberley-area residents.
“We do not have the groundwater to support that level of intensive development,” says Cox. “We are truly concerned about the density of this development and the impact on natural resources—water. The plan was not sustainable and not even marketable.”

The development elicited a strong reaction from the community. Cox says more than one hundred people filled the Wimberley Community Center to speak against the plan, while more left messages at the WWA offices. In the end, the developer withdrew the plan and shelved the development and has not spoken publicly regarding the plan since.

Water quality has long been a concern in Central Texas, with planners working to divert development from environmentally sensitive areas such as the aquifer recharge zones that crisscross the region. That’s emerging as a bigger concern in the ECT vision progress assessment is the availability of water; more than twenty-eight percent of Central Texas residents say it’s one of the most pressing issues facing the region.

What’s surprising is, while residents had strong and vocal opinions about the True Ranch development, Hays County officials have little power to control the direction, size or density of any development like this.

Under Texas law, counties have very limited authority to control development or plan for it, says Hays County Judge Liz Sumter. “We have no comprehensive planning authority, the way cities do,” she says. Counties don’t have zoning authority to regulate what uses are allowed on which tracts of land. “That’s why we have a rock-crushing operation next to a neighborhood,” says Sumter, referring to the 2005 fight where residents opposed Austin-based KBDJ LP plan’s to add a second rock quarry in Hays County.

Sumter says fifteen Hill Country leaders formed a coalition and, during the 2007 legislative session, lobbied state lawmakers for increased powers to designate land use and protect ground water supplies. They were unsuccessful, but Sumter is undeterred. She already has drafted three issues to champion when lawmakers meet again next year, including the authority to: control density of developments; establish buffers between commercial or industrial tracts and residential areas; and establish a safe roads fund, where developers contribute to infrastructure needs.

“We need the ability to create a comprehensive plan for our counties, a holistic plan,” says Sumter. “Right now, what we have is a jumble of priorities that are driven by property owners, and we have no say in how those properties might be developed.”

Sumter says conflicts like the one over water at True Ranch crystallize why counties need planning authority. “Citizens and local officials, we’re all concerned about preserving natural resources. At the same time, no one wins if developers are pushed out. Counties can help developers succeed, but we need to have the tools to do that,” she says.

Cox says it’s time for local government to have the power to protect its citizens and the natural resources they depend on. “Our county government is the government that oversees the health and safety of the people here. We want to see officials have the mechanism to plan for our health and safety,” he says.

**A future unlike the past or present**

John Fregonese, president of Fregonese Associates, an urban and regional planning firm based in Portland, Oregon, told a crowd of six hundred at an ECT luncheon this May that Austin’s future “will not be anything like the past, nor will it be like the present.”

With external forces like climate change, rising oil prices and fluctuating demographics at play, the future is likely to be very different from what we know today—from transportation, to energy consumption, to the aging of the nation’s population.

Members of Envision Central Texas say these global factors will shape the decisions we make and the region we become. But they also say it’s important to make decisions with this goal in mind: a region that’s economically strong, that’s environmentally minded, that values its unique character, and that builds communities accessible to all.

The question becomes will political leaders be able to guide us to achieve that vision? Will groups like ECT, along with voters, bring accountability to those decisions?

A glimpse of the evolving Austin may be seen along new transit corridors or within plans for denser development. It’s evident in the revival of downtown and infill projects like the Mueller and Triangle developments.

With Central Texas projected to add another million people over the next twenty to thirty years, will we recognize it? Will we be able to get around and enjoy it? Will it retain those qualities that we love?

At least one native Austinite thinks so. “We’re what makes Austin unique. It’s not a building or a neighborhood or a road. The Austin we want to hang on to is in our heads and hearts—we’re what Austin is,” says Long Center Director Cliff Redd.

Michelle Moon Reinhardt lived in Austin in the mid-nineteen-eights, back when MoPac didn’t stretch any further south than Ben White Boulevard and Pfugerville was a distant, rural town. She deeply regrets not investing in real estate then. You may e-mail Michelle at mreinhardt@goodlifemag.com.

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**Resources**

**Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District**—This group is studying the feasibility of regional passenger rail service from San Antonio to Georgetown, covering a route of one hundred twelve miles. The initial capital cost of the project would top six hundred million dollars and it would cost about forty-one million dollars a year to operate. For more information, visit asarail.org.

**Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization**—CAMPO is charged with coordinating regional transportation planning. The organization produces two main reports: the long-range transportation plan for the next twenty years, called the CAMPO Mobility 2030 Plan, and the short-range Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The CAMPO planning area encompasses all of Hays, Travis and Williamson Counties. For more information, visit www.campotexas.org.

**Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority**—Capital Metro provides bus service around the Austin metro area, providing an average of one hundred forty-thousand trips per day. Capital MetroRail is scheduled to begin late this year, offering commuter rail service during rush hour from the City of Leander to the Convention Center in downtown Austin. For more information, call 512-389-7400 or visit www.capmetro.org.

**Envision Central Texas**—A nonprofit planning group that was formed in 2001, ECT advocates regional planning, involving industry and political leaders as well as members of local communities in a collective vision for the future of Central Texas. For more information, call 512-916-6001 or visit www envisioncentraltexas.org.

**North Burnet/Gateway Neighborhood Planning Area**—The City of Austin has rezoned and produced a master plan for redevelopment of this large section of the urban core in North Austin. For more information, visit www.ci.austin.tx.us/zoning/north_burnet.htm. For information on the City’s neighborhood planning process, visit www.ci.austin.tx.us/zoning.

**Wimberley Valley Watershed Association**—This nonprofit group with five hundred members focuses on protecting groundwater quality and quantity by promoting sustainable watershed management through community education, conservation and land protection. For more information, call 512-722-3390 or visit www.visitwimberley.com/water.

—Michelle Moon Reinhardt