



SA TOMORROW COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND SUB-AREA PLANNING

SUMMARY

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INNOVATION

SA Tomorrow at its core is a comprehensive planning strategy for San Antonio. A big picture vision and policy direction set forth in the new Comprehensive Plan for how and where the city should grow is then given specific detail and implementation strategies in smaller area plans with a particular focus on 13 regional centers. San Antonio is expected to nearly double its population over the next 20 years with an additional 1.1 million people. This translates to roughly 500,000 new housing units and jobs being added to the community over the next two decades. Modeling showed that the traditional approach driven by land economics of putting the majority of the growth in the center and at the edges would cripple the city's already stressed transportation network and significantly impact air quality and other quality of life indicators. Community members also feared that a distributed growth strategy would threaten their established neighborhoods and the city's unparalleled collection of historic assets. The response was a polycentric approach to citywide planning that is often reserved for larger regional planning efforts. This innovative approach to a single city will introduce new pockets of urbanity, reduce trip lengths and promote air quality. Downtown retains its importance as the largest and most dynamic center for San Antonio and the region, but the SA Tomorrow effort engaged the community in identifying 12 additional regional centers for San Antonio.

OUTCOME

SA Tomorrow is a Comprehensive Planning Program and not just a single plan. The Comprehensive Plan effort was just a first step, but engaged over 2,000 residents in the visioning and overall direction setting for San Antonio's growth. Nine working groups were established to set specific goals and policies across specific topic areas and these stakeholders joined forces to formulate and operationalize the polycentric place-based approach that provides the foundation to the plan. The Comprehensive Plan process was approximately 24 months long. At the adoption hearing with City Council, the City and Centro San Antonio also presented the new approach to planning moving forward. The proposal divided the city into 30 sub-areas (13 regional centers and 17 community areas in between regional centers) and recommended a phased strategy for planning and implementing plans for each of those areas. Plans for regional centers already seeing significant growth pressure and community areas adjacent to the most active regional centers were prioritized to identify five phases of planning with six sub-areas included in each phase. The first phase includes Downtown, Midtown and the near Westside planning area immediately north and west of Downtown, respectively. The effort goes well beyond the planning department. Over a dozen city departments and over half a dozen partner agencies and organizations (including Centro) have been actively involved in the planning processes. The approach has resulted in all of these departments and partners taking ownership and using the plans to guide their own work programs and priorities.

EXECUTION

One major indicator of the planning efforts and their execution is the quantity and quality of growth being focused within the designated regional centers. Regional centers were identified as places that already had or have capacity for at least 15,000 jobs. These regional centers were then analyzed to determine their capacity and potential to add housing, entertainment and services to contribute to a distributed, but strategically focused set of mixed-use centers serving smaller sub-areas of the city. In these early stages of implementation, the regional centers are already seeing significant development activity with millions of square feet of development and thousands of housing units being added within designated centers. Community members have expressed relief that the focus has shifted from lower cost neighborhoods where development costs might be low, but the fiscal, social and cultural impacts are extremely high. Instead, quality development in regional centers is creating destinations with entertainment, jobs and essential services closer to more people in the community. The execution of the SA Tomorrow planning efforts is resulting in smarter growth, more equitable development and a stronger sense of place for centers and the neighborhoods that surround them.

REPRESENTATION

As mentioned above, the City of San Antonio and its partners are devoting a significant amount of resources to the ongoing planning and execution of all associated plans. Over a dozen city departments and over half a dozen partner agencies and organizations (including San Antonio's downtown organization Centro) have been actively involved in the planning processes. The Comprehensive Plan included nine working groups with between 15 and 25 people on each working group for a total of nearly 200 key stakeholders that met over nine times throughout the planning process. The Comprehensive Plan effort also engaged well over 2,000 residents at in-person events and another several thousand residents in online engagement activities. Materials for the planning effort were translated into Spanish throughout the planning process and the final plan has been translated into Spanish as well. The sub-area plans for regional centers and community areas each have a planning team with resident, business and agency representation. The planning teams have been assisting in plan development, creating implementations strategies and engaging the broader public. Interactive websites and a series of community workshops have been supplemented with pop-up intercept activities and focus groups throughout the planning processes.

REPLICATION

A key aspect of the SA Tomorrow effort is embracing that downtown San Antonio cannot be everything to everyone and that propping up additional regional centers can actually put downtown in a stronger position for long-term sustained success and vitality. Other communities of various scales can also learn from a regional-type approach to thinking about how their downtowns cannot just coexist, but in fact complement other commercial and mixed-use areas around their community. The SA Tomorrow efforts have taken a multi-layered approach to understanding, celebrating and enhancing the unique assets and opportunities associated with each regional center to ensure they don't detract from downtown or any of the other regional centers. The SA Tomorrow efforts have also considered key activity centers in both the citywide and sub-area planning scales to ensure a high level of coordination and promote long-term success for all centers. The citywide look helped to determine the growth capacity and potential of each center in a variety of sectors and development types. This high level direction and associated goal setting helped to begin differentiating the centers from one another and prevented a situation wherein each individual center is competing against the others.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The SA Tomorrow planning efforts involved a lot of complex planning and design concepts. All of the various data, analysis and concepts involved in the ongoing planning efforts are often too much for the average resident to wrap their arms around. Therefore, the SA Tomorrow effort included a strong branding and communications strategy to identify and home in on the key issues for various stakeholder groups and to communicate trade-offs associated with various decisions in an easy to understand way. Infographics, short videos and user-friendly summary documents have been used extensively to engage more people in more meaningful ways. Ultimately, the messaging for the public that has been most useful has been about focused and quality growth being better distributed around the community to increase equity, mitigate traffic impacts, promote better health and environmental outcomes, and create a more equitable distribution of jobs, goods, services and other amenities throughout the community. When community members understand the projected growth for the city, they want to make sure that the public and private investments associated with that growth benefit all residents, including existing neighborhoods and not simply people new to the area.

ADDITIONAL LINKS

SA Tomorrow (San Antonio, Texas) Video: <https://vimeo.com/124544640>

SAAP – Sub-Area Plan Websites

Phase I Regional Center Area Plans:

Brooks: <https://brooks.sacompplan.com/>

Midtown: <https://midtown.sacompplan.com/>

Med Center: <https://medical-center.sacompplan.com/>

UTSA: <https://utsa-area.sacompplan.com/>

Downtown: <https://downtown.sacompplan.com/>

Community Area Plan:

Westside: <https://westside.sacompplan.com/>

Phase II Regional Center Area Plans:

Texas A&M San Antonio: <https://texasam.sacompplan.com/>

Port San Antonio: <https://portsanantonio.sacompplan.com/>

NE Loop 410 and I-35: <https://nei35.sacompplan.com/>

Highway 151 and Loop 1604: <https://highway151.sacompplan.com/>

Community Area Plans:

Eastside: <https://eastside.sacompplan.com/>

Southeast: <https://southeast.sacompplan.com/>