



Cracking the Code: Join us for a Mixed-Use Code Town Hall on May 8

After receiving feedback from Sugar Land residents that they wanted more mixed-use spaces around town, the City's planning team began looking for ways to make that happen. Now, a new set of codes could help do just that. Join us for a Mixed-Use Code Town Hall on May 8 from 6-8 p.m. at Sugar Land Town Hall to learn more and give feedback.

Cracking the Code: A look at how our codes may be holding us back

By: Glissette Santana

Ruth Lohmer, the assistant director of planning and development services for the City of Sugar Land, knows a thing or two about what makes a city work.

Lohmer began working for Sugar Land in 2007 as a young city planner and as she moved her way up in the organization and took on more responsibility, she recognized the need for change.

“When we updated the Land Use Plan (a component of the City’s Comprehensive Plan, which serves as a guide to how the City should develop and redevelop and evolves over time to reflect changing conditions) in 2018, we heard through that process that residents wanted mixed-use type areas in our community,” Lohmer said. “They wanted not just a mix of uses, but they want us to create places where people can gather outside of work, school and their home.”

When they received that type of feedback, Lohmer and her team began to look for ways to create those types of spaces.

The team recognized that one of the reasons these places don't exist is because of the current set of development codes, also known as zoning, which currently separate residential and commercial land uses. Since there are only two types of zoning code – residential and business – mixed-use spaces were more difficult to get approved if an idea was presented to the City by a developer. As a result, the City of Sugar Land is developing a new mixed use zoning code that allows certain residential and commercial land uses to mix.

“The idea that commercial and residential land uses are separated has been embedded in the zoning code since it was created in the early 1960s,” Lohmer said. “From the beginning, we've been separating them.”

But through the Land Use Plan, residents expressed a desire for more walkable mixed-use places. As a result, the Plan designated several areas around Sugar Land as Regional Activity Centers (RACs) and Neighborhood Activity Centers (NACs). These RACs and NACs are envisioned to be the commercial and civic hubs of the city that attract people to work, shop, eat, and attend events, with mixed-use and walkability being key to their success.

Mixed-use spaces typically offer a variety of housing forms, (duplexes, triplexes, live/work units, townhomes and mid-to-high rise apartments) while bringing convenience to your front door by integrating every day needs like retail, shopping, grocery stores and restaurants with housing.

Mixed-use places currently in Sugar Land, like Sugar Land Town Square, had to go through a planned development (PD) process, which Lohmer said is a deterrent to most developers due to the rigorous process.

A PD is a customized zoning district for a specific property and a particular development proposal. They can take anywhere between six and 18 months to complete, which is out of sync with the real estate transaction timeline. This makes it difficult for projects to respond to any changes in the real estate market.

To address this inconsistency, the City is introducing a new mixed-use code that will allow mixed-use developments, like regional and neighborhood activity centers, to more easily be approved and developed at targeted locations throughout the city.

The new mixed-use code front loads design and development standards set forth in the PD process, allowing the development proposals to be approved faster than before. The result is higher quality development in a shorter amount of time that rewards and incentivizes creativity and innovation, allowing

Sugar Land to remain economically competitive with surrounding municipalities.

That's where you come in.

From May 8 to 19, the City will ask residents to submit their feedback for the code online via Konveio. Instructions on how to access Konveio will be available in late April/early May.

The City is hosting an in-person Mixed-Use Code Town Hall from 6 to 8 p.m. at Sugar Land City Hall to help residents further understand the suggested additions.

"Resident feedback will help inform some elements of the code," Lohmer said. "The code, in a lot of ways, is super technical. But there are a lot of elements that residents can influence and we welcome your comments. We want, and need, your feedback."

The Planning team said the feedback is important to the project as the City wants to understand what residents want to see in their community. Comments given could help shape how Sugar Land looks in the future.

Opportunities for feedback will start on May 8 and end May 19.

"We need to be thinking about the younger generation, but at the same time be thinking about the folks that are already living here and looking for places to downsize," Lohmer said. "We want this code, and the spaces that it will bring, to be accessible and available to everyone in our city."

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Information provided by the city of Sugar Land.
311@sugarlandtx.gov | Call us: 311 or 281-275-2900

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 110 | Sugar Land, Texas 77487
City Hall Address: 2700 Town Center Blvd. North | Sugar Land, Texas 77479

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