

# Good Stewardship: Repurposing Sims

June 27, 2024 | 6:00 - 7:00 p.m.

**Topic:**

Multi-use Development

**Presenter(s):**

Anne Haynes, Chief Transactions Officer - Rally Austin

**Number of Attendees:**

15

**Meeting Notes:**

- Former Sims Elementary School campus is part of the district's repurposing process to identify future uses for underutilized sites that are responsive to community needs
  - Background information can be found on the district website >> [Site Repurposing | Austin ISD](#)
- [Rally Austin](#) (formerly known as Austin Economic Development Corporation) is a real estate nonprofit organization created by City of Austin in 2020
  - Focuses its work to build an Austin that supports and reflects our community's needs, uniting and driving progress across three critical areas of development:
    - Complete communities
    - Arts, music & culture
    - Catalytic development
  - Rally is governed by an independent board consisting of 20 voting members who are nominated by the City and other external agencies in the community, including ACC, UT, ULI, minority chambers of commerce, City of Austin, AISD
- Rally Austin is currently working on redevelopment of [Blocks 16 & 18](#):
  - Sites are owned by the [Urban Renewal Agency](#)
  - Located on 11th Street and part of the African-American heritage district; surrounded by residences, Ebenezer Church, and local businesses
  - Block 16 currently used as a parking lot; and Block 18 is currently used as an outdoor amphitheater tied to the Victory Grill

- Project established equitable development goals - most important to preserve the district's African-American heritage and bringing black and brown visitors and residents to the area
- Trying to bring affordable spaces for residents and businesses and provide a path to ownership
- Substantive community engagement process to validate and inform the Request for Proposal (RFP) that went out to developers
- Completed a pre-development feasibility study to determine what was viable before identifying any partners
- RFP process took place from August 2023 - April 2024
- Urban Renewal Board voted to recommend Pleasant Hill Collaborative as the Proposed Development Team to Austin City Council
  - City Council anticipated to vote on July 18, 2024
  - Pleasant Hill Collaborative is comprised of multiple developers: Servitas, GNDC and Topo
- Process is just beginning with design and construction slated to take place and then anticipated occupancy in 2027-2028
- *Comment: Stressed the importance of retaining access to green space for the community as it is being lost in East Austin due to all the development.*
- *Q: Would like to see the Sims building be retained and renovated to support local businesses. What is causing the turnover in businesses on 11th Street?*
  - Definitely based on rents, but also impacted by the increases in property taxes that get passed onto them from the landlord
  - Plan for the new construction on Block 16 and 18 is to figure out the operational structure and financing to ensure that the commercial spaces stay affordable over time
  - Since it is public land, looking into how much of the land could remain property-tax free
- *Q: Who will qualify for these affordable spaces?*
  - The residential and commercial will have two different processes that is determined by how it is funded
  - Often based on annual household income, majority of Block 16 and 18 residential units will be at or below 50% of the median family income
  - Discussing how to make sure the opportunity is shared with residents who previously had been displaced
- *Comment: Creatives typically make less than \$40,000 and so the affordable rents will still be difficult to afford.*
  - For Blocks 16 and 18, the proposed developer has identified some live-work options to target creatives.

- Important to note that there was also an emphasis on family-sized units (2-4 bedrooms) in the development
- *Q: Why was Rally Austin invited to speak as it relates to the future of Sims?*
  - Rally led a robust community engagement to create a vision for Blocks 16 and 18 that will serve the needs of the community but also be a catalyst for continued growth
  - There can be lessons learned from Rally about how their process and the considerations made to ensure they deliver on mission
- *Comment: Long-term Austin resident and has major concerns that the community is not involved and unaware of what Austin ISD is doing. Further, feels that there are too many apartments and townhomes in the immediate area and that is not needed on the Sims site.*
- *Comment: Resident of the area for over 59 years but recently moved away. Concerned that Sims is named after an outstanding African-American teacher and think it would be a disservice to do anything outside of education. The building has a close connection to the people in the neighborhood.*
- *Q: Regarding Block 18, philosophically, what is the goal to go from an open green space to a high density development?*
  - Green space would be reduced, but vision is to create permanent outdoor space for music
  - Properties were purchased 30 years ago with the intent of a mixed-use
  - Difficult balance between honoring existing uses with what the community needs
  - Heritage trees will be preserved
- *Comment: Community member runs an art program for students and is currently working with Ridgetop Elementary. Hoping to find space to provide art programming for all families and making that affordable. Has worked and lived in Austin for over 12 years. Echoed that it would be great to see Sims continued to be used for educational purposes.*
- *Q: There are a lot of small local businesses in the area that need space in order to drive growth and generate revenue in the community. How do we ensure that the reuse of Sims can create and keep revenue for the community and be occupied by the people who live in the community?*
  - Public ownership means opportunity for removal of property taxes that often makes spaces unaffordable for local businesses
  - Key to find organizing body that can identify small businesses but also provide technical support
  - Interesting model is [Bethune Empowerment Center](#) in Houston and [BOK](#) in Philadelphia

- Management group has to be designed so they can stay in business but that they also know what the community wants
- Sims benefits from time to figure this all out
- *Comment: Recommendation to host next meeting onsite so group can tour Sims to spark conversation and ideas about reuse of building*

**Action Items:**

- Next series of meeting to restart in September after the summer break; dates and times to be determined
- District to continue to improve outreach to community to bring a higher level of awareness to the repurposing effort