



## Public Land Use in Austin – Executive Summary

In Travis County, public-sector entities (local, state and federal) own more than 6,000 pieces of property. While many of these properties are being used to provide important public services, these taxpayer-owned assets also offer an opportunity to create housing the Austin metro area desperately needs. These properties, if developed appropriately and returned to the tax rolls, can also produce revenue that can bolster local government budgets without continuing to drive up tax rates.

The unsuccessful bond campaign in November 2015 for a new civil courthouse in Downtown Austin cast a spotlight on how valuable these publicly owned land assets can be; opponents of the courthouse proposal, including RECA, felt the \$20 million downtown block could and should be used to produce market-driven development that could help meet Austin’s critical housing shortage and pump millions of dollars of tax revenue to local governments. Since then, jurisdictions including Travis County, Austin ISD and the City of Austin have begun to take steps to make some of their land assets available to the development community.

While these efforts are admirable, they may not go far enough. Rather than select individual pieces of property for subsidized affordable-housing pilot projects (or, for that matter, other uses), local public landowners should assertively move forward on evaluating *all* their land assets, identifying properties all over the city that could be used for housing, and develop coordinated strategies for making them available to the development community.

Comprehensive planning for the use of public land could be more effective with coordination between entities, of the sort just begun in a limited way by the city, county and school district. Often, planning for the future use of public land (by either the public or private sector, or both in partnership) has been conducted on an ad hoc, site-by-site basis. Many of the efforts envisioned by these plans have proven to be politically controversial — from the Triangle and Brackenridge Tract to Austin ISD’s Facilities Master Plan process and The Grove.

As the voice of the Central Texas real estate community, RECA recommends local public landowners initiate ongoing efforts to develop and update comprehensive jurisdiction-wide facilities plans, with an eye toward returning surplus land that could be better used for housing to the private market and the tax rolls. These landowners should also work together to reduce barriers to acquiring and developing these properties, using innovative strategies such as land banks.

RECA has called for the development of 150,000 new housing units over the next 10 years within the city of Austin to stabilize the regional housing market, accommodate the city’s rapid growth, and make strides toward the affordability that Central Texas needs to continue to be prosperous and sustainable. Leveraging the region’s inventory of publicly owned land can help achieve the outcomes that the Austin area critically needs to succeed.