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## Drenner's take on the town



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Land use and real estate attorney [Steve Drenner](#) has been in the trenches for some of Austin's biggest developments. His list of projects includes the Frost Bank Tower, the W Hotel and the Grayco South Shore District redevelopment — not to mention serving as the founding president of the Real Estate Council of Austin.

Recently, Drenner formed the new real estate-focused boutique law firm Drenner Group PC that will specialize in land use, entitlement issues and incentive requests. Drenner jumped from Winstead PC, where he worked since 2011 as the head of the entitlement team at the firm's Austin office.

I caught up with Drenner to ask him about his move and the current state of Austin's land use. You can read the full Q&A — including his nine tips for city officials as they try to improve development policies — online by searching "Drenner" on our home page.

**In your experience, how well has Austin crafted its land use policies?** I moved to Austin in 1976, and I've seen and participated in a tremendous amount of change during the past 38 years. I think we've been able to retain the essence of what has always made Austin special, but that does not mean that — with 20-20 hindsight — we should not have done a number of things differently. For instance, as a city and as a region, we have flunked mobility and transportation. Also, we have created a real problem with affordability at many economic levels. The list goes on and on, as we have dealt with unprecedented levels of growth. Some things we got right. For instance, our downtown is the envy of most cities, and it certainly was not that way 20 years ago. So, on balance, we deserve about a "C".

**What are the most pressing land use issues Austin is facing today?** Traffic, traffic, traffic. We simply have not prioritized transportation issues, and we are living with the results of our failure. Over and over again, we have failed to create an all-encompassing, regional, multi-modal, long-term transportation plan. Compounding that error, we have repeatedly

turned our back on opportunities to build roads and extend transportation infrastructure. I would like to think that we have learned from our mistakes, but the facts do not support that conclusion. We still do not have the type of far-reaching plan that we need, and we continue to debate the merits of desperately needed transportation infrastructure. Other communities have done a much better job with this fundamental issue, and it just drives me crazy that we are stuck at "Go."

**How will the 10-1 Council reorganization affect how the city makes land use decisions?** Obviously, 10-1 is the biggest change that most of us will ever see in city governance. I hope that we can the greater diversity that it promises without some of the downsides that I have seen in other communities with similar governance. For instance, San Antonio has a 10-1 system, and what has evolved is a ward-style politics where a single politician is the gatekeeper and ultimate decision-maker for all land-use decisions in his or her territory. Each City Council member in San Antonio — through what is frequently referred to as "Council courtesy" — normally defers to the judgment of the Council member in the district where the property is situated. In Austin, I hope that each Council member will see their job as representing their district and all of Austin. One of the things I most appreciate about the current structure is that each Council member is essentially forced to weigh in and debate all the big decisions. As trying and contentious as it's been at times, it has led to some of the best possible and most creative outcomes time and time again. I hope that we do not lose that with 10-1.

Robert Grattan covers government, courts and economic development for the Austin Business Journal.