

Last Thursday, the Austin City Council took a major step toward a more livable city when it passed the long-awaited “Big Box” ordinance. The ordinance expands the notice range and guarantees a public hearing on proposed retail projects over 100,000 square-feet. Most important, it ensures a fair voice for Austin residents and business owners on massive supercenter projects that may affect their lives and livelihoods.

The big box ordinance began life over two years ago, as the chief policy recommendation *Big Box Retail and Austin; An Independent Review*, a 2004 report co-sponsored by Austin Full Circle, Liveable City, AFSCME 1624 and the Austin Independent Business Alliance. As the report noted, Austin’s land development code had not kept pace with the changing face of retail. As a result, a massive 24-hour, 20-acre supercenter could legally be built under the same zoning as tiny mom-and-pop grocery. Only neighbors within half a block of the proposed supercenter would be notified and, unless the project needed rezoning, it could be approved by city administration without any public process at all.

Following the release of the 2004 big box report, Austin Full Circle and its partners began the arduous task of turning a concept into law. Working with labor and business representatives, Full Circle representatives spent months gaining community support for a big box ordinance, securing endorsements such key organizations as the Austin Neighborhoods Council, along with hundreds of individuals and community leaders.

In the fall of 2005, the proposed ordinance began a lengthy journey through the city’s internal review process, a trip that would ultimately span 16 months. Through multiple meetings with subcommittees, city staff and elected officials, Full Circle and its partners persevered, citing the need for the ordinance with increasing urgency as the proposal inched its way through unexplained delays.

Then last fall - after more than a year in the city system - the big box ordinance got an unexpected boost when Northcross neighbors discovered that city administrators had approved a 225,000 square-foot supercenter for their neighborhood *without any public process whatsoever*. Nearby residents and business owners were horrified: why hadn’t they been told about the project? Why were there no public hearings? Suddenly, everyone understood the need for the big box ordinance.

And so, at a late hour last Thursday, the Austin City Council finally voted to put the big box ordinance in place, bringing to a close more than two years of work by Austin Full Circle and its community partners.

Many thanks to all our Full Circle members for their ongoing interest and support on this issue. Because of you, Austin neighbors and business owners will be guaranteed a fair voice on major projects moving forward - and we’ll all be a step closer to a more livable city for everyone.