

New zoning increases density

North Austin neighborhood target of growth

BY RACHEL YOUNG

In the next 20 years, the Austin population will nearly double in size, and those 1.5 million people are all going to need a place to live. Since the Austin city limits aren't getting any bigger, city officials recognize their only choices are to grow taller and denser, and their eyes are set on Northwest Austin for a bold style of zoning that could put 20-story buildings along the streets you drive every day.

This 2,300 square acre area, known as the North Burnet/Gateway Neighborhood Planning Area, is bordered by Metric Boulevard to the east, MoPac to the west and US 183 to the south.

"The North Burnet/Gateway neighborhood is a huge area the size of downtown, the state office complex and UT planning areas combined," Planning and Zoning Director Molly Scarbrough said. "It's also an area where two rail lines come into pretty close proximity, half a mile to a mile of one another. There are really only two other areas in Austin where that happens."

Neighborhood planning

Since 1996, the city has used the neighborhood

planning process to take input from residents and developers in creating zoning, land use maps and building standards. The neighborhood plan is then reviewed by the planning commission and adopted by the city council as an amendment to the city plan.

The planning for the North Burnet/Gateway neighborhood, technically two neighborhoods lumped together, began in February 2002. For most neighborhood plans, the process is small and starts with community input and ends with simple zoning. For North Burnet/Gateway, the planning and zoning department saw the unique public transit, land and road features of the area and decided to do something bigger. They hired a consulting firm to look at the viability of the neighborhood being developed to shoulder Austin's growth.

This neighborhood is larger than any other in the city, but besides simply size and transportation access, planning and zoning has a number of reasons it has chosen this area for what one consultant calls a "second downtown."

All the right elements

The North Burnet/Gateway neighbor-

hood uses the term "neighborhood" lightly. The area holds commercial developments such as the Arboretum and Gateway shopping centers, and industrial areas like IBM and UT's Pickle Research campus, but no single-family residences, only apartments.

The 2000 census showed 4,800 residents, an extremely low population density compared to other neighborhoods such as the North Austin Civic Association neighborhood, the one closest to North Burnet/Gateway, with 22,000 residents. This means development there is less likely to disturb existing homeowners.

The bulk of North Burnet/Gateway also lies just outside the Edwards Aquifer Recharge zone, making it less environmentally sensitive. For a well developed area, this neighborhood still has a large amount



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City Council strives to represent growing city

Each of the seven members of the council, including the mayor, have their own constituencies to represent. The council also represents the entire city of Austin.

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of vacant land and publicly-held land that serve as ideal catalyst sites for introducing a new style of development.

A new type of zoning for north Austin

After a community vision meeting in July 2006, the consultants took residents' suggestions and went to the drawing board. When they presented their draft plans to the public March 24, renderings showed tall buildings, townhouses and mixed-use developments similar to the Domain.

The Domain has become a test case for what planning and zoning wants to do with the area, but while mixed-use may be the wave of the future, it is plagued by outdated zoning laws.

"The Domain case is interesting because they came in and they had to jump through a lot of hoops to do the kind of development that they're doing. The zoning system isn't set up for that, and we haven't made it easy for them," Scarbrough said. "Even though we as a community are supporting this kind of development, our rules and regulations were created in the past without this type of development in mind."

Consequently, this neighborhood plan will be the first in north Austin to use a zoning overlay, a type of zoning more commonly used in areas such as Town Lake and the Capitol building.

"A zoning overlay creates a sense of place. There's a vision to a particular area that we're trying to achieve," Neighborhood Planning and Zoning Department Director Greg Guernsey said. "In the University neighborhoods of West Campus, a zoning overlay allowed higher buildings. In some respects that's kind of what's being suggested here."

Unlike traditional zoning, where a specific purpose is assigned to a specific piece of property such as residential or commercial, the zoning overlay allows multiple uses to exist simultaneously and assigns general zoning subdistricts

over large areas.

"What we're trying to do is create the type of regulatory environments to facilitate [the Domain's] type of development without everyone jumping through the hoops," Scarbrough said.

Neighborhood concerns

While the North Burnet/Gateway Neighborhood has no single-family homes, the outlying areas are filled with residential neighborhoods.

"The area would benefit from zone overlay and there are a lot of positives to the plan. But my neighborhood's concern is when you put in a zone overlay where you could add tens of thousands of people, you need to consider traffic impact not just within the boundaries of the plan but on the people immediately outside the plan as well," said Milwood Neighborhood Association president Dustin Lanier. "What happens to the Duval exit [impacts the] quality of life in Milwood."

The draft does include some new road construction and offsets the high density with strict building codes requiring tall buildings to be set back allowing light into the street. Construction over a certain height would require developers to contribute to greenspace or drainage.

"The thought of bringing potentially 80,000 new residents in this area in 30 years is scary," Scarbrough said. "But the key here is a) in thirty years and b) the regulatory framework that we're creating could accommodate that. It doesn't mean that every building is going to be 20 stories, most likely they're not."

While Lanier is a supporter of public transportation and dense living, he wants to make sure that the quality of life in the city doesn't compromise the quality of life in his neighborhood.

"If Duval Road is not well planned, and is set up to be one of the main mouths to the "second downtown," it will reduce the value of our properties, and raise the daily agitation level of everyone trying to get home," Lanier said. "Conversely, if it is planned for, and we can still get home without waiting and waiting, we have a lot to look forward to in what the Domain and North Burnet/Gateway will bring."