

REDEVELOPING BRYAN'S TEXAS AVENUE: THE CASE FOR A CORRIDOR REDEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

An Action Recommendation Report by the
City of Bryan
Planning and Zoning Commission
Texas Avenue Corridor Subcommittee



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INTRODUCTION

Texas Avenue (Business State Highway 6) extends approximately eight miles north-to-south through the heart of Bryan. Some segments of this major roadway have seen promising signs of redevelopment in recent years. Other parts of Texas Avenue pose a challenge not only to property and business owners, but also to developers and planning professionals: long-vacant, underutilized and dilapidated properties and a number of vacant commercial facilities.

In April 2006, the Bryan Planning and Zoning Commission established a subcommittee comprised of three Planning and Zoning Commissioners, John Clark, Michael Beckendorf and Randy Haynes, to study development issues along the Texas Avenue corridor. The subcommittee's goal was to find ways to enhance the economic viability of the corridor.

The subcommittee defined a focus area and, together with city staff, identified challenges that this major roadway is facing. The subcommittee then formulated specific action recommendations and summarized its findings in this report. The report makes the case for a comprehensive study of the Texas Avenue corridor, a Texas Avenue Corridor Redevelopment Master Plan. The subcommittee believes that such a "roadmap to revitalization" should be at the center of an organized public-private partnership effort that succeeds in revitalizing the Texas Avenue corridor.

FOCUS AREA

The subcommittee focused on the approximate 4½-mile long segment of Texas Avenue between downtown Bryan and the southern city limits. This study area was chosen because this 54-block area has an enhanced potential for development and redevelopment in the near future due to its location, vacant building stock and underutilized properties. The study area connects two poles, one that is experiencing continued economic growth, northern College Station, and one that is undergoing an award-winning economic comeback, historic downtown Bryan. A concentrated redevelopment effort in this area would emulate and link these economic successes at its north and south ends.

There are 227 properties fronting this 4½-mile long road segment. In 2006, 209 of these 227 were taxable properties and appraised at an average value of \$395,230. The City of Bryan's total annual property tax revenue from these taxable properties was approximately \$525,685 or an average \$2,515 per property. With more than 800 properties located within 400 feet of both sides of the Texas Avenue corridor study area, the potential of the Texas Avenue corridor as a revenue source is undeniable. The subcommittee sought to identify impediments to development and redevelopment that have caused a varying, but overall gradual decline in economic activity along this major thoroughfare during the past three decades. Observations were made in the following areas: land use/zoning, appearance and public infrastructure/traffic access.

CORRIDOR CHALLENGES

LAND USE AND ZONING

Historically, the function of the Texas Avenue corridor has been twofold. On the one hand, this busy arterial street is Bryan's major roadway responsible for carrying large amounts of traffic from the city's north end to its south end and vice versa. On the other hand, just 30 years ago, before the construction of Earl Rudder Freeway, Texas Avenue was *the* highway connecting Waco and Houston making the properties that adjoin this roadway prime locations for all kinds of nonresidential business ventures.

When Bryan adopted zoning in 1989, most properties along the corridor were zoned for retail or more intense commercial use. That may have seemed like a good idea (or compromise) at the time. However, commercial zoning is often only half a city block in depth and now includes only remnants of what once were prime business locations. Thus, commercial strip zoning poses perhaps the biggest challenges to meaningful redevelopment along the corridor.

Most of the properties in the focus area are still currently zoned Retail District (C-2) or Commercial District (C-3). With the exception of properties in the North Oakwood Subdivision, all properties with frontage on Texas Avenue south of Villa Maria Road are zoned C-2 District. All properties fronting the corridor between Villa Maria Road and South Coulter Drive are zoned C-3 District. Properties fronting the east side of Texas Avenue between South Coulter Drive and East 31st Street are also all zoned C-3 District.

Many land uses permitted in these nonresidential zoning districts, but especially the C-3 District, for example, automobile repair establishments, lumberyards and indoor shooting ranges, are generally considered inappropriate in close proximity to residential districts. However, most properties with frontage on Texas Avenue in the study area are located adjacent to larger residential neighborhoods, for example, the Upper Burton Creek neighborhood north of Villa Maria Road or the Garden Acres, Ridgecrest and Meadowbrook Subdivisions south of the Tejas Center. Several properties north of the Texas Avenue/Villa Maria Road intersection are occupied by automotive-related uses, from dealerships and repair establishments to detail shops and auto parts stores.

Predominantly on the northern and southern ends of the study area, these areas zoned for nonresidential (i.e., retail or commercial) uses are only one lot (<200 feet) in depth, which leaves little room for modern development under existing regulations. In fact, many of these lots are too shallow to meet current development standards for the zoning district in which they are located. Existing developments rarely conform (many could never conform in their current configuration) to existing development standards from building setbacks and buffering adjacent to residential areas to driveway separation, throat depth and on-site circulation standards.

One of the biggest challenges for Texas Avenue's revitalization is to find the appropriate mix of land uses for the many substandard properties along the corridor. It appears that a reduction of the large retail and commercial zoning districts that border the corridor may be appropriate in some areas to provide opportunities for development of multi-family residential, multi-story office buildings and mixed-use developments. Allowing for a larger variety of land uses along

the corridor could help break up what is now a 4½-mile long strip reserved almost exclusively for retail and other commercial establishments.

In the areas that are to be reserved for retail and commercial uses, consideration should be given to the specific context in which these properties are situated. For example, a property that is adjoined by a large residential area could be reserved for businesses that can serve the needs of that adjoining neighborhood so that residents do not have to travel long distances (and can perhaps walk to) their neighborhood store on Texas Avenue. Other areas, especially larger properties, could be reserved for developments that attract customers from other areas of the city. However, a more detailed land use feasibility study is needed to help determine the highest and best use for each property along the corridor.*

Based on these observations, the subcommittee recommends the following specific actions to address land use and zoning issues along the Texas Avenue corridor:

- Reevaluate zoning patterns along the corridor and suggest targeted zone changes to help reduce adjacency of inappropriate land uses while recognizing the specific context of each property.
- Identify areas that are appropriate for medium to high-density residential, larger scale office and mixed use developments and use targeted zone changes to reserve these properties for such uses.
- Allow for more flexible development regulations and develop new standards to facilitate the adaptive reuse of substandard properties. This may include, for example, allowing buildings to be constructed closer to property lines or allowing parking lots and maneuvering areas which are otherwise prohibited in buffer zones adjacent to residential districts.
- Investigate strategies to facilitate property assemblage to encourage larger-scale redevelopment of substandard properties.

APPEARANCE

The 2006 Bryan Comprehensive Plan identified community appearance, especially along entrances into the city and along major corridors as the second most important issue for Bryan. While aesthetic appeal can be subjective, it is no secret that the Texas Avenue corridor has very few positive aesthetic features. For example, many properties have paving right up to the curb, unattractive pipe fences on property lines and parking lots where parking spaces are not striped

* Earlier this year, the City of Bryan contracted with a group of second year Masters of Urban Planning students at Texas A&M University's Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning to conduct field surveys of properties in the Texas Avenue corridor study area. Under the guidance of Dr. Elise Bright, the students prepared a visual inventory of all properties, surveying each parcel's improvements, such as buildings, parking areas, signs and curb cuts. The group's work may be a useful resource for a professional land use study.

and do not have landscaped end islands. On many properties landscaping is virtually nonexistent or appears only sporadic and uncoordinated.

The subcommittee believes that the removal or relocation of overhead utility lines could dramatically improve the corridor's appearance. Where burying utility lines is either impossible or cost prohibitive, relocation to parallel streets should be investigated.

Based on these observations, the subcommittee recommends the following specific actions to address appearance issues along the Texas Avenue corridor:

- Actively pursue available mechanisms and state and federal programs available to finance cosmetic corridor improvements.
- Develop incentive programs encouraging property owners to make improvements to their properties and, to a limited extent, within the public street right-of-way (landscaping only). Such improvements could include enhancements to building exteriors, parking lot improvements as well as driveway improvements and landscaping. Programs could be structured similar to the downtown façade improvement program where the city provided matching grants for façade improvements.
- Investigate relocation of overhead utility lines underground or to parallel side streets.
- Vigorously eliminate code violations that have a direct detrimental impact on the appearance of the corridor. Such violations may include, for example, trash and debris, junk vehicles, vehicles parked on sidewalks (or in the right-of-way where there are no sidewalks), sidewalks and curbs overgrown with weeds and grass, dilapidated structures and fences, as well as outdoor storage of material or equipment.
- Enforce the required removal of dilapidated sign structures.
- Identify street segments where grass or trees could be installed in raised median sections or planters.
- Explore decorative street lighting that can contribute to creating a “corridor feeling.”
- Replace dilapidated directional signs along the corridor as well as faded street name signs.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRAFFIC ACCESS MANAGEMENT

While they may not be as obvious to the average citizen as the aforementioned appearance issues, sufficient water, sewer and drainage facilities are important considerations for any development. From the southern city limits to the area commonly referred to as “the Bend” (between Dodge and Pease Streets) properties along the corridor have access to a 12-inch water line, which provides adequate capacity, but has been in the ground for many decades. An older

6-inch waterline with less than adequate capacity extends from the Bend to downtown Bryan. In addition, there are many water line loop connections that cross under Texas Avenue that have been cut off after the lines failed and no resources were available to replace these connections. Reestablishing a looped system could provide a higher degree of reliability. If a line break occurs, it can be isolated with little impact on consumers outside the immediate area. Also, by keeping water moving, looping increases fire-fighting capability.

Along many sections of Texas Avenue, storm sewer inlets are located at the corner radii of intersecting streets, for example, at the southwest corner of Texas Avenue and South Coulter Drive. This causes problems for two reasons: it restricts the ability to build right-turn lanes along Texas Avenue at these street intersections and makes it difficult (if not impossible) to install handicap accessible curb ramps for sidewalks.

Most properties with frontage on Texas Avenue access this major arterial street via driveways. Historically, many driveways appear to have been allowed based on decisions made relative to individual properties and without a holistic view to access planning. The result is an often illogical and excessive number of access points on Texas Avenue, which pose a real threat to the health and safety of motorists and pedestrians.

While both the Texas Department of Transportation and the City of Bryan now have traffic access and driveway design standards, many nonconforming driveway openings remain on Texas Avenue. Many properties along the corridor have open or continuous curb cuts which are especially dangerous as vehicles can enter and exit these properties at mostly uncontrolled locations, thereby creating many potential conflict points. A comprehensive traffic access management plan could dramatically improve the safe and efficient flow of traffic along the corridor.

In addition, some traffic signals along Texas Avenue are more than 50 years old and in desperate need of new poles and/or signal heads. Traffic lights along the corridor are not currently connected via fiber optic cables. Such a connection could facilitate communication between the signals and improve traffic progression.

Finally, many sections of Texas Avenue do not have sidewalks. In some areas, heavy pedestrian traffic is evident by the worn places in the grass. Sidewalks foster a pleasant and convenient pedestrian walk space that traverses adjacent properties and links residential areas to shopping centers. In some instances, it appears that simply completing the gaps between two sidewalk segments could make a dramatic difference for non-motorized traffic along the corridor.

Based on these observations, the subcommittee recommends the following specific actions to address public infrastructure and traffic access issues along the Texas Avenue corridor:

- Explore and establish a financing mechanism, perhaps similar to the parkland dedication fee, for the construction of sidewalks. Promote sidewalks away from the back of the curb wherever possible to allow for landscaping and general beautification efforts.

- Investigate financing methods for needed upsizing, reconstruction or replacement of aged infrastructure. In the meantime, continue prioritizing public infrastructure improvements along the corridor as part of the city-wide capital improvement plan.
- In cooperation with the Texas Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan Planning Organization, institute a comprehensive traffic access management strategy to eliminate conflict points along the corridor.

FROM BRYAN'S COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TO A TEXAS AVENUE REDEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

In the 2006 Comprehensive Plan, the citizens of Bryan express a fresh, self-determined vision for their community for the 21st century. In addition to redevelopment of commercial areas, community appearance and preparation for new development, Texas Avenue rehabilitation was prioritized as one of the ten most important issues for Bryan.

The subcommittee believes that the time is right for Bryan to articulate a vision for redeveloping Texas Avenue in a comprehensive study, a *Texas Avenue Redevelopment Master Plan*. Subcommittee members believe that such a master plan can identify solutions to existing land use, corridor appearance, infrastructure and access management issues along the corridor with professional expertise and in greater detail than any subcommittee report. Through a Texas Avenue Corridor Redevelopment Master Plan, the city can take a pro-active role in long-range planning and realizing the vision of its citizens by implementing recommendations of the 2006 Comprehensive Plan.

The subcommittee believes that a Texas Avenue Corridor Redevelopment Master Plan should:

1. contain development concept recommendations for the arrangement of buildings and other improvements for every square foot of property along the corridor similar to suggestions for the rescue and redevelopment of historic downtown in the award-winning 2001 Downtown Bryan Master Plan; such development concepts would tie master plan recommendations to specific properties and help illustrate the vision for the corridor;
2. provide a market analysis to help identify feasible and desirable land uses along the corridor;
3. contain recommendations for development standards along the corridor which encourage development of more diverse and mixed land uses;
4. make recommendations for instituting comprehensive traffic access management to provide for the safe and efficient flow of traffic along the corridor;

5. identify available local government tools, tactics and financing vehicles for comprehensive corridor redevelopment and suggest practical strategies to pursue these;
6. recommend ways to facilitate property acquisition and assemblage to facilitate larger-scale investment;
7. suggest ways to provide property and business owners with economic incentives to improve their real properties; and
8. put forward a plan for staged public infrastructure improvements preparing the corridor for redevelopment and new development coordinated with similar improvements needed in other parts of the community.

There should be no doubt that development and implementation of a master-planned redevelopment effort for the Texas Avenue corridor will not happen overnight. Such a monumental task will be a multi-year, multi-faceted undertaking that will probably not produce immediately recognizable results. It will take a concentrated effort involving stakeholders such as property and business owners along the corridor and a broad-based coalition of private sector investors, representatives from local government entities and the State of Texas that is willing to commit to years of working to develop and implement a unified vision for the Texas Avenue corridor.

The subcommittee believes that the engagement of property owners and developers in the visioning, crafting and plan implementation stages will be critical to make this a successful master planning effort. Both the public and private sector must be willing to undertake the financial risks and rewards of such an ambitious enterprise. All sides must take a genuine interest in the economic recovery of this major roadway and be financially committed to begin planning and implementing the corridor's transformation.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP – THE TEXAS AVENUE CORRIDOR TASK FORCE

task force: a temporary grouping under one leader, usually with a specific deadline, which is established for the purpose of accomplishing a definite objective and which reports its findings to a larger group or legislative body.

In short, the next step is not really a step but a process that has to be ongoing throughout the entire project: to get the word out and vigorously promote the idea of a serious approach about Texas Avenue revitalization; in other words, to get people excited about the potential of this inner-city roadway and instill in them the desire to create and build the trust to adhere to an overall vision for the corridor.

The subcommittee believes that the talent and entrepreneurship that lives and thrives in this community can achieve the ambitious goal of resurgence in interest and investment in the Texas

Avenue corridor, and, thereby, the community as a whole. Commissioners therefore propose the establishment of a diverse Texas Avenue Corridor Task Force, a Making Texas Avenue Happen, Inc., appointed and funded by Bryan's City Council, which picks up, expands on and carries forward the recommendations contained in this subcommittee report.

The City of Bryan has successfully confronted numerous challenges, including downtown, development on the east and west sides and the South College Avenue corridor. A comprehensive approach to revitalizing and rehabilitating this major inner-city corridor should not be delayed any longer.