

Mueller neighborhood connects residents, from front porches to the Web

Developer of former airport site says new urban design fosters old-time sense of community.

By [Juan Castillo](#)

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In the Mueller neighborhood, a group of residents regularly tromps through a 31-acre field of native grasses, a prairie reclaimed from the runways of the former municipal airport that once occupied this swath of East Austin.

With the sun still beating down in the early evening and with spray paint cans in hand — bright orange is the color of choice — they mark invasive plants that threaten the prairie. (Landscaping crews later spray herbicides on the targets left behind.) Afterward, the sweaty neighbors retreat to someone's home for a cool drink or maybe a glass of wine — "There's usually some element of fun to a Mueller club," Janelle Dozier, who founded the aptly named Friends of the Mueller Prairie, says cheekily.

Even in green-friendly Austin, a neighborhood club that protects a prairie is unusual, but in Mueller, a still partially built community that is hailed as a model of so-called new urbanism, residents say it's a commentary about the way of life. They describe a Mayberryesque experience where neighbors play together, ride bikes together, discuss books together, do business together, party together, sew together and, yes, save the prairie together. The social clubs take off during encounters on front porches or sidewalks along Mueller's narrow streets or on its robust Intranet with its numerous discussion forums and real-time news about neighborhood events. The community's website lists more than 30 social groups.

Mueller is "high-tech, and it's high-touch," says Sandy Fivecoat, 61, who, with her husband, Bill, moved to the neighborhood in 2008 after living in Northwest Austin for more than 25 years.

With its mandatory front porches almost hugging the sidewalks, the very close proximity of the houses (step off three paces, and you're at the next one), common courtyards and generous public parklands, Mueller was designed to bring people together.

Though the 711-acre development is not yet 3 years old and is only about one-fifth completed, residents say the design is working, helping shape a community that stays connected as if it had been around for generations. They can't help but compare Mueller with their old neighborhoods, describing them as cocoons that hindered building relationships with the people next door and beyond — big houses, big lots and fenced-in back yards where gatherings were mostly limited to family and maybe small cliques of the same friends.

Michael Adams, 46, whose wife, Felicia, is Sandy's daughter, says he knew just one or two neighbors in his old neighborhood in Northwest Austin, "whereas here I know just about everyone." A substitute teacher who used to work at Apple, Adams formed another Mueller social group — the bike club, whose 39 members ride to distant coffeehouses for caffeine and pastries on weekends. It caught on after Adams posted on the community website that he was looking for bike buddies.

About 1,000 families live in Mueller, and about 3,500 people work there, in the Seton Family of Hospitals, Dell Children's Medical Center, the University of Texas Health Research Campus and other medical and research facilities, and a major retail center. When it's completed, targeted for sometime between 2015 and 2017, the mixed urban private-public development will be home to 10,000 residents and 10,000 employees.

"Mueller is like living in a little bitty town attached to all the amenities of a larger city," Sandy Fivecoat says.

Blast from the past

Mueller's design is called new urbanism architecture.

But there's really nothing new about it; it's a throwback to the way neighborhoods were built more than 50 years ago, says Carol Coletta, chief executive officer and founder of Chicago-based CEOs for Cities, a national network of urban leaders. The development patterns that followed, with big lots and backyards and garages facing the street, contributed to a breakup of community life, Coletta says.

"There's a sense of wanting today to recapture that sense of community that people once felt we had and are nostalgic for," she says.

Among the theories behind new urbanism design is that getting people to live in the front of the house or in public areas creates a sense of community, says Greg Weaver, president of Mueller developer Catellus Development Group. Theoretically, what is happening in Mueller is what was supposed to happen, Weaver says. "But did we all think it would happen as quickly as it did? Probably not."

A number of residents think that what is happening is organic, not just the product of design.

Felicia Adams, 39, says the social connections today begin much the way they did in 2007 when workers were erecting the first house frames in Mueller. At dusk, the hammering would stop and quiet would descend, "and then you'd see the neighbors gather to view the progress, and it just started all the conversations, all the little meetings and the get-togethers," says Adams, who, with Michael Adams and their four children, was among the first 17 families to move into Mueller.

"Everybody is very welcoming," says Melita Elmore, an environmental scientist who moved to Mueller in 2008. "Everyone's new or fairly new, so you're not moving to an established neighborhood where people are already in cliques."

Mueller's penchant for social interaction was recently on display at the home of Martin Barrera and Veronica Castro de Barrera, who welcomed neighbors into their two-story home for a potluck supper to meet Vickie Jacobson, the new principal at nearby Maplewood Elementary School. A crowd of at least 60 people — mostly parents in their 20s and 30s with their children in tow — spilled from the living room into the kitchen, a dining area and the backyard.

The supper idea was born in a conversation on the sidewalk among friends who thought it would be a good chance for parents to get to know Jacobson. Parents from Cherrywood and surrounding neighborhoods were invited, and invitations went out on the neighborhood website and on a Facebook page.

Among the crowd were Melanie Harshman, a state librarian who founded Mueller's book club; her husband, Dusty, a financial planner; and their 6-year-old daughter, a student at Maplewood.

For Dusty, Mueller's thriving social connections had unintended consequences. He opened his practice at home after realizing that Mueller's unique sense of community — he estimates he's met at least 300

families here — could help nurture a business. Harshman has an open office hour every Wednesday night on his front porch.

Rules of attraction

But is Mueller different because it is changing people and the way they interact and live, or is it simply attracting the kind of people who already are social creatures?

"I think the answer is a little bit of 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg?' " says Coletta, with Cities for Change, adding that although new urbanism architecture attracts a self-selective group of people who seek its design features, it also appeals to some who might not have recognized the benefits of the features in the first place.

"Nobody needed an iPhone until it was produced," she says. "That's the beauty of these kinds of developments. They allow people to live a different kind of life they might not know they desire and that many will find completely compelling and charming. And some people, that's not for them."

Kathleen Malcom, 52, who founded Mueller's Boomer Baby Social Club, thinks her neighbors chose Mueller because they had similar expectations.

"They knew what they were getting into with (the design), and they believed in being pedestrian-friendly and in sustainable (energy-efficient) buildings." Malcom says. "It was like-minded people in different stages of life but with common interests."

Castro de Barrera says she and husband Martin, both architects, picked Mueller for the design and location and because they considered it a great place to raise their 5-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter.

"In architecture school, students learn that windows close to the street keep a community and its children safe," Castro de Barrera says, commenting on Mueller's signature design. "Everything is accessible here. What makes it great is that we always meet new friends."

But what about the Scrooges in Mueller — if there are any to be found — who prefer to be left alone?

In at least a dozen interviews across the neighborhood, not one Mueller detractor emerged.

Dusty Harshman chuckles and says not to worry — "It's still Austin. There's a live and let live feeling here."

Seeking diversity

Twenty years of planning by city leaders and neighborhood groups led to the creation of the Mueller master plan. They imagined a development where families with a wide range of incomes could live in a compact, connected neighborhood where they could walk to work, parks and businesses.

The master plan agreement signed by Catellus and the city in 2004 requires that 25 percent of all Mueller housing be reserved for moderate- and lower-income households.

Although no one is keeping track of demographics, Weaver, the Catellus president, says the affordable housing requirements and Mueller's wide range of pricing options — from about \$240,000 to nearly \$1 million — contribute to the neighborhood's diversity.

"Here you have (everyone) from the young singles to the single retirees to the empty nesters to couples with kids," Weaver says.

"It's real America. It's not homogenous," Fivecoat says. In her old suburban neighborhood, all the houses sold for about the same price, which meant that all the people "were kind of the same."

"It's diverse here, economically diverse, culturally diverse; we have same-sex parents; there's people of color and people from a variety of income levels," Fivecoat says.

As Mueller builds a future, East Austin's new neighbor must not forget that 16 surrounding neighborhoods helped shape its blueprint, Martin Barrera says. He hopes that Mueller will do everything it can to be a part of those neighborhoods, many of which are poorer and more ethnically and racially diverse than areas west of Interstate 35. Mueller's ample parkland, pools and trails are open to the public under the public-private development agreement. "That's a small step in the right direction," Barrera says. So is the volunteer work that some Mueller parents are doing in East Austin schools.

"Anything that would show our commitment to being a good neighbor is important," Barrera says.

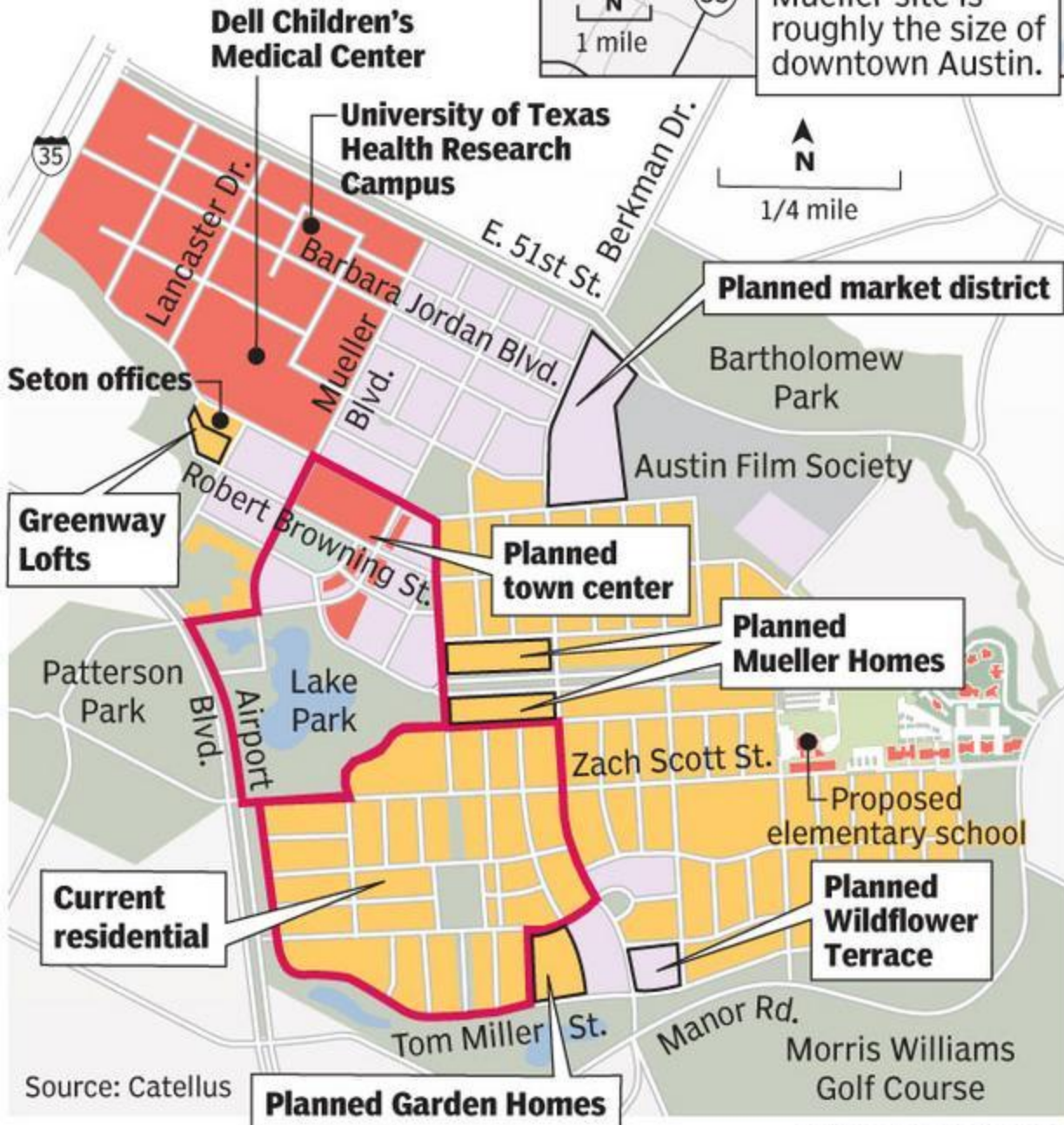
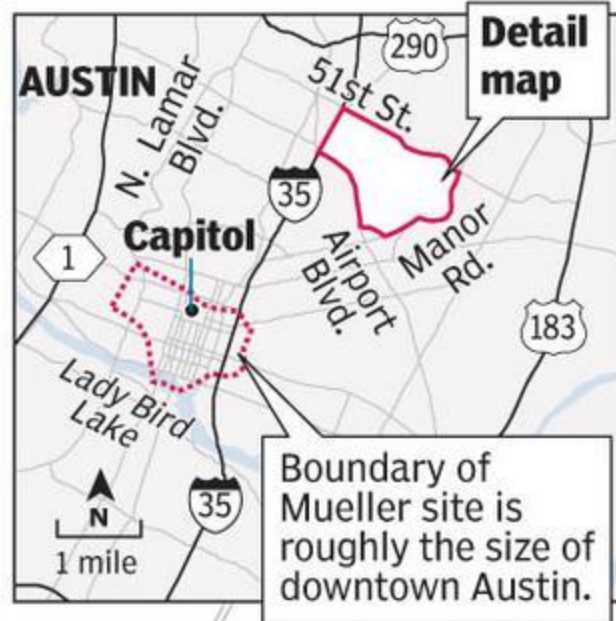
Malcom, the baby boomer, says she hopes Mueller residents will continue being good neighbors to one another as well.

"We're small enough to have linked up with each other, and I hope that as we grow, that Mueller's new sections will establish the same types of relationships there and with the older sections," she says. "I hope we can keep this up."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin

Development at site of former Mueller airport

- **Commercial:** Retail, offices, research facilities
- **Residential:** Single-family houses, condos, townhouses
- **Mixed-use:** Residential with stores, offices



Source: Catellus